OPUNTIA 549

Victoria Day 2023

Opuntia is published by Dale Speirs, Calgary, Alberta. It is posted on www.efanzines.com and www.fanac.org. My e-mail address is: opuntia57@hotmail.com When sending me an emailed letter of comment, please include your name and town in the message.

ABOUT THE COVER

2023-05-18

photo by Dale Speirs

The crabapples are in full bloom. So are the dandelions but I'll skip photographing them. We've had a warm sunny spring so far but June is the month that worries Calgarians. That is the height of the rainy season, and after the great flood that devastated Calgary in 2013, we get nervous whenever Environment Canada says "periods of rain".

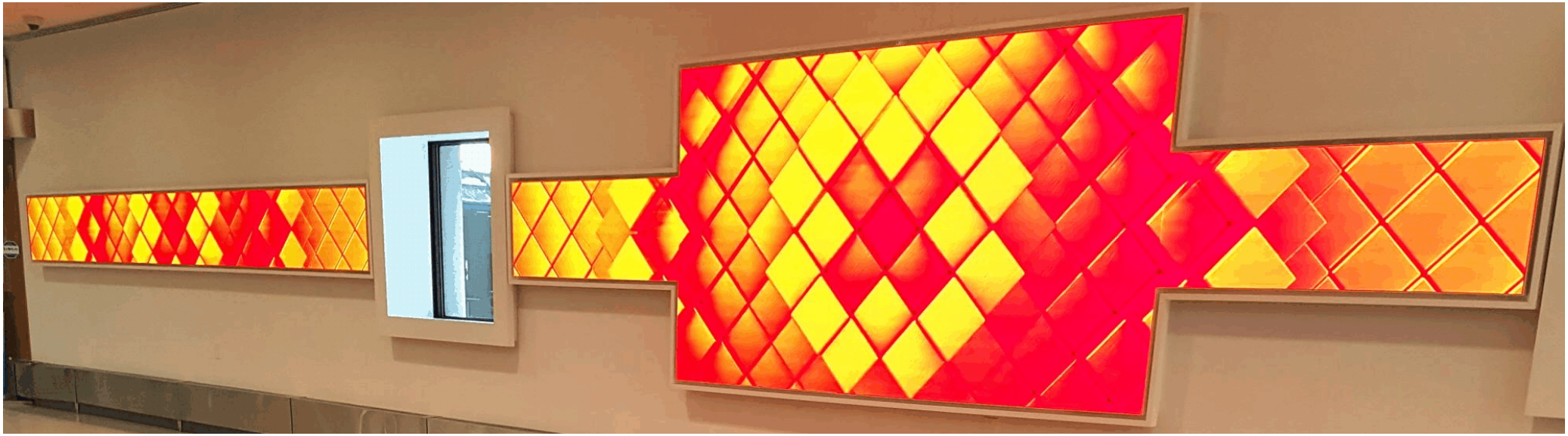
BOW VALLEY SQUARE ELECTRONIC ART: PART 6

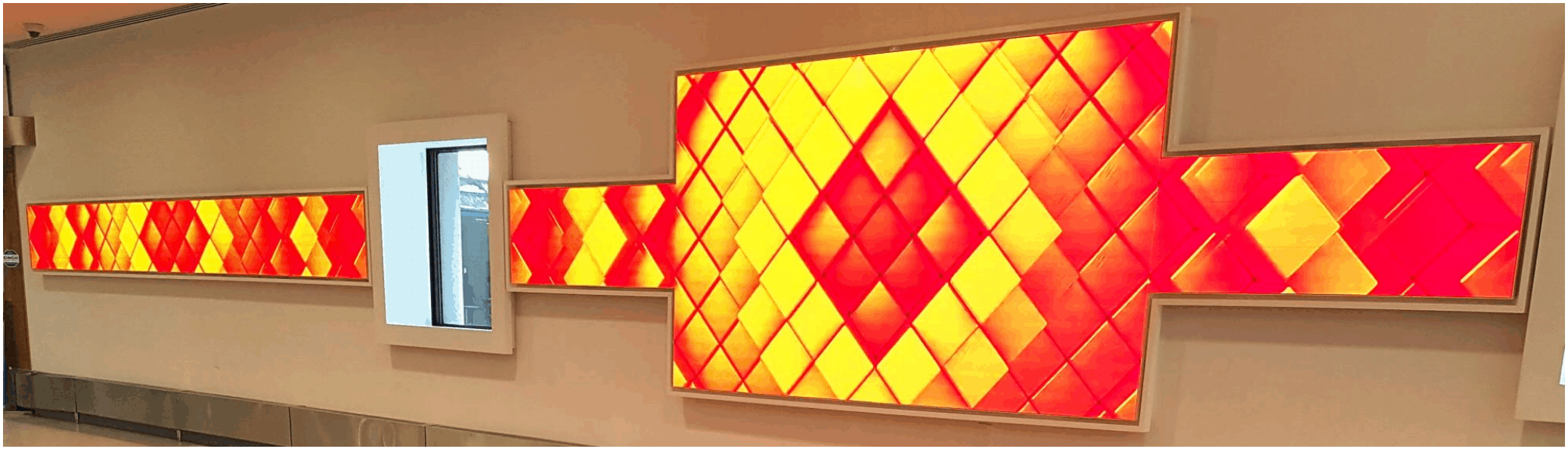
photos by Dale Speirs

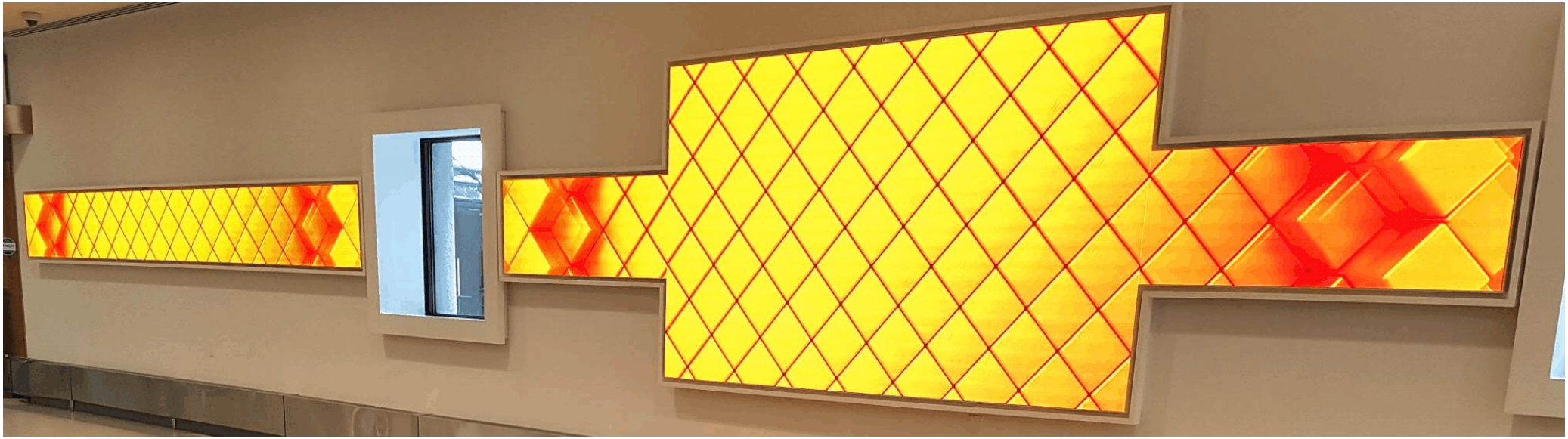
[Parts 1 to 5 appeared in OPUNTIA #487, 490, 516, 527, and 536.]

Bow Valley Square is a cluster of skyscrapers in downtown Calgary linked into the Plus-15 pedestrian system which connects about half the downtown skyscrapers at the second floor with an enclosed pedestrian network. Along the south side, connecting to the Brookfield Place tower across the street is this wall of electronic art. The displays by local artists constantly rotate.

This first series was simply tiles rotating colours, which I photographed a year ago on 2022-04-20.







This next series was photographed 2022-09-01.

IF YOU AREN'T SQUAMOUS,
THEN WHY ARE YOU TRYING TO BE ELDRITCH?: PART 20
by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 19 appeared in OPUNTIAs #298, 333, 340, 352, 365, 395, 410, 415, 422, 443, 465, 480, 486, 492, 498, 504, 513, 530, and 536.]

Cooking With Howie.

There seems to be a subgenre developing of cookbooks based, however tenuously, on the Cthulhu Mythos. Not necessarily how to cook a shoggoth or what wine goes best with roast Elder God, but real life foods for busy folk.

NECRONOMICON COOK BOOK (2014) by Sean-Michael Argo was a combination retelling of the Cthulhu Mythos and recipes. Both were from Down South in the USA, as told by a good ole boy in the business of hunting eldritch beasts and wanna-be gods.

The book is available as an Amazon print-on-demand. Being self-published, the formatting is sloppy, with lots of widow and orphan lines. There were a multitude of incorrectly hyphenated words such as 'app-eared'.

The monospaced font was forgivable but was faint and should have been in a bolder face. However, tired eyes such as mine appreciated the larger type size.

The book alternated between assorted recipes and stories of hunting critters from the spaces between the dimensions. As the narrator remarked, chasing and killing eldritch things was strenuous work, and one had to eat hearty to keep up strength.

Alchemical mixology helped in dealing with the elements. For earth elements, beer and mead were useful to get a buzz on before charging into battle. Tequila or whiskey would do for the element of fire. For casting spells, try the recipe given for mint juleps or a hot toddy.

The protagonists hunted mostly cultists who kept trying to summon Elder Gods and the like. The battles were fought with pump-action shotguns, assisted by goggles that enabled distinction between possessed and normal humans. Shotguns were better than rifles because you only had to be close.

The narrator ranted against Cajun cooking because it was sourcerer food. Standard high-calorie Southern cooking was better because it provided energy for a busy day of shotgunning a room full of shoggoths.

The central part of the book went into the origin of the Old Ones and Elder Gods, written in pseudo-Biblical style. The ongoing battle between Dark and Light was a new version of the Mythos.

Assorted spells and ancient texts followed, interrupted by recipes for fried chicken, cheeseburger meatloaf, pork chops (from wild boars are the best), beef pot roast, buttermilk beer pancakes, goat chili, and many many more. Vegetarians need not bother with this book.

The apple pie recipe mentioned that it was not only a good treat for humans but it made wonderful bait for shoggoths. They wouldn't eat other sweet foods but set out a freshly baked apple pie and they would come slithering.

There were no recipes for fish or seafood. The Mythos creatures generally come from dark waters, so why eat something that was swimming around with them. The ultimate comfort food after a bad day fighting shoggoths is macaroni and cheese.

COOKING WITH LOVECRAFT (2018) by Miguel Fliguer was a mixture of recipes, essays, and short stories. The recipes were scattered through the book, too many to mention all. All told the book was good reading. Well recommended.

Picking a few stories and recipes at random, Sausage Deep Ones worked best with knackwursts but hot dogs can be substituted in a pinch. Slice partially through in X patterns, then boil to curl the cut areas and produce tentacled beings, pardon me, food.

Fried Honey-Garlic Chicken Of Tindalos required careful attention because the recipe was intended to act as bait for interdimensional creatures. Since supermarkets do not stock anything from Tindalos, the reader will have to make do with Earth chickens.

On to the short stories, again picking just a few. "The Uneatable" was narrated by a restaurant critic. The style of writing, unlike many of the other stories, was in the Lovecraftian manner, never with a one or two syllable word when five or

six syllables would suffice. The critic told to his friend the history of an abandoned tavern much like the one they were exploring.

Two centuries ago the chef had prepared a dish of green gelatin. What was to have been the food became the eater. What was the eater was still there in the ruins, and it was hungry.

"The 419 Eater" demonstrated the Innsmouth people could be just as up-to-date as humans. A Nigerian scammer got a reply to his email about the $14 million transfer. Even better, the victim Tobias Marsh said he would bring lots of cash to Africa to seal the deal.

Lovecraftians will recognize the Marsh family as eldritch servants of the Old Ones. When the scammer and two of his friends met with Marsh, thinking to rob him, he and his two friends had them for dinner. That is to say, the scammers were on the menu. Delicious, too.

"The Flavor Out Of Space" was about a meteorite that fell on the Garcia farm and changed the water. The eggs, butter, and produce of the farm became not only delicious but addictive. The Garcias sold their wares in the village with great success. Alas, all things must pass, and eventually the well water reverted to normal.

"The Horror From The Ice Cream" was the next story. The unnamed narrator went with Lovecraft and a friend named Morton in search of The Beast in Vermont. This was a bucket of ice cream, not an eldritch squamate.

The Beast included 20 scoops of as many different flavours, plus a brownie, four whole bananas, three cookies, ten scoops of walnuts, four toppings, four ladles of hot fudge, and a thick layer of ice cream.

Never read a book on an empty stomach. Only massive willpower kept me in the house instead of dashing out and driving to the nearest Dairy Queen to order one of everything.

The Beast was normally meant to be shared among several people but the three men declared they would have one bucket apiece. The proprietor told them that while he was preparing the buckets, they might like to view the graveyard out back.

Lovecraft was the only one who managed to finish the bucket. After the applause, the creamery proprietor took them on a tour of the place. The graveyard was where unpopular flavours were buried, each with their own tombstone.

At this point, the story turned into an alternative history. Lovecraft learned the creamery was owned by Jews. He was so impressed at the quality of the ice cream that he repented of his racism. Instead of dying of stomach cancer in 1937, he became a civil rights leader until his natural death in 1964.

"The Dangerous Kitchen" was a Mythos pastiche in the Kafka style. A man failed to clean his kitchen, letting the organic mess build up. One night he went to bed and woke up transformed, not into a cockroach but an eldritch creature with tentacles in all the wrong places.

An essay "An Inquiry On The Menu Served At The Palace Of King Nargis-Hei In Sarnath, Upon The Celebration Of The Thousandth Anniversary Of The Destruction Of Ib" looked at the sources of Lovecraft's Sarnath story.

In it, Lovecraft described the decadent final years of the King, including a banquet of excesses such as camel heels, peacocks, and pearls dissolved in vinegar. Lovecraft was well read in history. Fliguer was able to trace some of the sources for the menu.

Of particular interest was an urban legend dating back to Roman times about how pearls were dissolved in vinegar or wine, then imbibed. The lesser truth is that pearls take days to dissolve, while the stories had Cleopatra or some other woman toss an earring into a glass and drink it up immediately.

Laugh With Lovecraft.

LOLCRAFT (2022) is an anthology of 36 humourous stories about the Cthulhu Mythos, edited by Michael Cieslak. The book was a pleasant read. To mention some of the stories ...

"King C" by Nathan Carson was about an Elvis impersonator who had plastic surgery to add tentacles on his face. He needed a gimmick and looking like Cthulhu worked, especially with the blue rinse crowd. I'm surprised some Lovecraft fan hasn't already had the operation.

"Report To The CEG And Executive Board V1.0" by J. Edwin Buja was a bureaucratic report to the Elder Gods explaining why the Glorious Return was botched.

Written by the Documentation department, the report explained why the Engineering and Marketing departments were at fault for the problems. Anyone who has worked for a large corporation or a government agency will have read reports like this. So do the Elder Gods.

"Consider The Shoggoth" by Nick Bowen did exactly that, as detailed in a report by Miskatonic professor Charles Webberly. He visited nearby Kingsport during their annual Cuttle Fest and observed traditional events such as Summoning the Sea Gods and enjoying a hearty meal of shoggoth bits.

As was to be inevitable after the pandemic, there were some stories parodying what happened recently to us mortals. There is no reason to believe that Elder Gods wouldn't have similar problems.

This brings us to "Bhegna Cthellha's Guidelines On Pandemic Etiquette Whilst Dining Out" by Brandon Ketchum. Rules included wearing hoods, not touching anything with tentacles except the actual food, and maintaining correct distances during sacrifices.

"My Aunts And The Cornwall Horror" by K.G. Anderson was a perfect parody of the Jeeves stories by P.G. Wodehouse. Blithering idiot Artie Whitsmer and his valet Leeds crossed paths with H.P. Lovecraft, who was visiting England.

All sorts of eldritch horrors came out of the sea in pursuit of HPL. Artie was dependent on Leeds for help in dealing with batrachian monsters, not to mention relieving one of his aunties of her copy of NECRONOMICON lest she use it the wrong way. Matters ended reasonably well for Artie, and HPL caught his ship for the return voyage.

LET MARS DIVIDE ETERNITY IN TWAIN: PART 17

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 16 appeared in OPUNTIAs #310, 321, 328, 332, 337, 354, 357, 369, 372, 384, 401, 429, 437, 466, 495, and 503. Reviews of the WAR OF THE WORLDS movies appeared in #289.]

Martians On The Air.

Jack Benny, real name Benjamin Kubelsky, was considered the greatest radio comedian, peaking in the 1940s and early 1950s. His shows appeared under a variety of sponsor's names but everyone, then and now, just referred to the shows as "The Jack Benny Show". The free mp3s are available from the Old Time Radio Researchers at www.otrr.org/OTRRLibrary.

"I Flew To Mars" aired on 1953-05-17. The first half of the show was about Benny's return from a tour, plus miscellaneous gags and songs. He got bored, so in the second half he walked over to the public library to find an interesting book to read.

Just after he arrived, his announcer Don Wilson arrived with the Sportsman Quartet group. Ignoring the librarian's desperate pleas for quiet, they boisterously sang the middle commercial for the sponsor.

Benny apologized and the librarian was forgiving. She said the incident was the biggest excitement since they accidently filed the Kinsey Report next to "Forever Amber". Benny went off to find a book to read.

He came across a shelf of science fiction and picked out a title "I Flew To Mars In A Spaceship". He sat down with the book and began reading it. A musical segue shifted him into a full-cast performance of the book. Or at least a very condensed version, as only 8 minutes remained in the episode.

Benny was Commander Buzz Cork and his navigator Tonda was played by his wife Mary. When she came on board the spaceship, Buzz remarked how alluring she looked in her low-cut oxygen tank.

They went through the checklist, which included a buggy whip. Buss questioned that one and Tonda replied *"Somebody goofed"*. Away they went into space.

Various unrelated gags filled the time until the landing on Mars. When the ship touched down, there was the squealing of car brakes. "*Old-fashioned sound man*", griped Benny.

Benny and Tonda stepped outside to become the first humans on Mars. A creature, played by Mel Blanc (the voice of Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck), approached them, speaking with a thick Noo Yawk accent. Benny remarked he hadn't seen any farms. The creature replied they ate irradiated air, powdered uranium, condensed hydrogen, and cimmaron rolls.

That last item got a big laugh from the audience but will be missed by any modern listener. There was a running gag in previous shows where Benny interacted with a baker played by Blanc, in the same Noo Yawk voice, who sold cimmaron rolls and refused to believe the word was 'cinnamon'.

Buzz and Tonda were taken to the Martian leader, played by the show's boy tenor Dennis Day. He ordered them to be executed. Benny began shouting "*You can't, you can't*", at which point librarian broke the fourth wall and told him to be quiet. Benny agreed to take the book home and finish it there. And so to the final commercial and credits. Not exactly a Ray Bradbury vignette.

Martians In Print.

"A Zloor For Your Trouble" by Mack Reynolds (1954 January, IMAGINATION, available as a free pdf from www.gutenberg.org) began awkwardly with a big-game hunter Napoleon Prescott being asked to go to Mars and bring in a specimen or preferably a pair of zloor. It looked like a rabbit and was about the same size.

The awkwardness came because Prescott had a bad habit of cutting people off before they could fully explain the situation. He then got into troubles because he didn't have all the data, which he would have had he listened. We all know people like this in real life, but in stories the effect is to create fake drama.

Prescott was told zloors were wanted because they were believed not to be an indigenous Martian species but had been left behind by some passing alien culture. After hearing they were mild-mannered herbivores, he cut off the government contractor explaining the zloors to him.

Upon arrival on the red planet, Prescott learned the catch. Zloors were the size of a rabbit but weighed several tons. Walk up to one and it wouldn't struggle if you tried to lift it, but you couldn't lift it without a heavy crane. Rifle bullets bounced off zloors. They fed on Martian trees but could only move on bedrock, so they couldn't spread.

Prescott eventually found a spaceship that could carry a pair of zloors to Earth. He tamed them by feeding them peach pits and luring them on board. The most unbelievable part of this story was not the zloors but that you could get peach pits on Mars.

Humans.

"Eight Million Dollars From Mars" by Winston Marks (1954 November, IMAGINATION, available as a free pdf from www.gutenberg.org) is an obsolete story but not the way a science fiction reader would think. Pauker was a bank robber who had killed ten men. Three were guards, the others were his cohorts. He now had sole possession of $8 million in cash, ten times that in our depreciated currency.

Of course, even now, long before we have routine travel to Mars, cash is rapidly becoming extinct. $8 million is quite a weight in banknotes. The story, however, was about Pauker's miscalculation in boarding the spaceship to Mars. He was going to live the good life there, but while he would complete the trip, it would be as a vegetable.

Passengers on the ship made the 9-month trip in semi-hibernation. Strapped into couches, with assorted tubes into their veins, they were kept fit by a drug injection. Pauker, while trying to be inconspicuous upon boarding, got himself injected with a double dose of the drugs.

The double dose left him in agony and unable to notify an attendant. As far as any of the crew knew, he was just another passenger napping his way to Mars. The extra drugs sped up his metabolism.

Because the intravenous tube supplied nutrients for normal metabolism, he was emaciated and a living skeleton by the time the ship landed. The drugs also addled his mind. He would never get a chance to spend his loot.

Ne'er Do Wells.

"Buried, But Not Dead" by Garnet Johnson-Koehn appeared in COMPOSTELA: TESSERACTS TWENTY (2017), an anthology edited by Spider Robinson and James Alan Gardner. The story was about looters, or freelance salvagers as they liked to think of themselves, boarding the Martian moonlet Deimos.

Long ago the rock had been a secret government base and had since been sealed off. No one knew what was there, so two looters, pardon me, salvagers, decided to find out. And so they did, discovering a sentient computer that was bored as it orbited endlessly around Mars with nothing to do. It wanted to go places and do things. What better way than to transfer itself to the salvagers' ship.

New Mars.

"Beneath The Surface, A Womb Of Ice" by Deborah L. Davitt (2022 Nov/Dec, ANALOG) was a Bat Durston story set on Mars. A team of explorers had various adventures crossing Mars, much like an action-adventure on Earth where explorers crossed painted deserts and towering mountains.

In this one, they eventually went down into an ice cavern and discovered a lake of liquid water. So as not to contaminate the waters, they withdrew until proper tests could be made. Unfortunately one of them died in an accident. His wound dripped into the water, where human cells met up with Martian microbes to begin a massive change.

LITERA SCRIPTA MORTEM: PART 9

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 8 appeared in OPUNTIAs #424, 428, 440, 469, 505, 513, 515, and 533.]

Cozy Bed And Breakfasts.

RESERVED FOR MURDER (2021) by Victoria Gilbert (pseudonym of Vicki Lemp Weavil) was a novel in a cozy series about Charlotte Reed of Morehead City, North Carolina. She operated the Chapters Bed-and-Breakfast, which specialized in small book-related conferences. Think of them as mini-readercons.

Twas a sunny July weekend, but any Jessica Fletcher can fix that. The guest of honour at the B&B was romance author Amanda Nobel. She was reluctant to mix with her fans, some of whom could out-obsess any sci-fi fan.

Nonetheless, she agreed to a meet-and-greet and a book signing. She had to publicize her new series about a time-traveling pirate who kept finding unrequited love in all the wrong places.

These were essentially historical romances, which meant she was plagued by fans who nit-picked factual inaccuracies in her novels. Worse yet, they would just not let go.

Attending was the president of Nobel's national fan club, Lisette Bradford, who wasn't the actual problem, other than being murdered in Chapter 5. She had her own serious problem, her ex-husband Billy who was stalking her at the B&B.

All this kept Charlotte Reed and her next-door neighbour Ellen Montgomery busy sleuthing. Since Beaufort was a seaport village, this meant they were Fletchering rather than Marpleing.

There were other suspects in the murder besides Billy. Lisette wrote a lot of fan fiction based on Nobel's books. I don't know why I was surprised to learn romance fans wrote fanfic, but upon reflection there was no reason why they shouldn't. The social dynamics of the fan club were no different than other genres.

Reed and Montgomery went Fletchering in a sea of paranoia and suspicion. All kinds of back stories were uncovered, some of them fantastic enough to be fiction. Questions were raised as to who was plagiarizing whose work, fan or pro. Lisette was a ghostwriter and may have been blackmailing Nobel.

The gunpoint confrontation, the one that all cozies finish with, was soon resolved. In the epilogue revelation, the killer had her fanfic stolen by Lisette, who in turn used it to ghostwrite Nobel's latest novel. Pity the publisher.

A FATAL BOOKING (2022) was the next novel in the series. The current guests were a book club focused on fairy tales and children's literature. As one of their events, they held a costume party on the Mad Hatter theme. One of their members unfortunately drank a cup of tea flavoured with cyanide.

The victim had quite a past history and lots of acquaintances with motives. Enough to keep both police and Mrs Fletcher busy. The seminars continued since the murder was not suitable cause for cancellation. Fairy tales before funerals.

The final confrontation was on a speeding power boat but Charlotte Reed survived because she would be needed in the next book of the series. Therefore there was no suspense. The killer had been fencing stolen jewelry through the victim. They had a disagreement which she lost.

OF MURDER AND MEN (2017) by Lynn Cahoon was a novel in a cozy series about Catherine "Cat" Latimer of Aspen Hills, Colorado. She and her partner Shauna Mary Clodagh operated a writers' retreat in combination with a bed-and-breakfast.

Trouble was, Shauna was chasing after a wealthy landowner Kevin Shield instead of attending to her duties. Cat's husband Michael had recently died, so she had another cross to bear. The first problem was solved, sort of, when Shield was murdered.

Cat went into Miss Marple mode but was constrained by the arrival of the latest guests for her current workshop. Shield was a nasty sort, so there were many suspects, Shauna among them. A further distraction was people, some of them with badges, asking questions about Michael's death. Eventually the two deaths, and the estates, were linked as part of a money laundering scheme.

The culprit having been dealt with in the denouement, the epilogue was a remark by Cat's boyfriend: *I'd really, really like a peaceful retreat one of these days. You have your guests, they do their writing thing, you all talk about books, then they go home.*

SLAY IN CHARACTER (2018) moved the action to Outlaw, Colorado, where Cat Latimer and her latest writers' retreat were researching the Old West. Not mentioned but this trip helped spread the murders around. Back home in Aspen Hills, folks were beginning to talk about Cat.

The village of Outlaw was staffed with Old West reenactors. One of them, Danielle, was portraying a saloon girl and was strangled. The writers' group raced off sleuthing, with Cat panting behind trying to keep up. An entire flock of Marples barged about, thrilled to be living a real investigation. Needless to say, the police were not happy.

After numerous alarums, the killer was brought to light. He had been embezzling money and was caught out by Danielle, who promptly began blackmailing him. The writers' group had no shortage of ideas for their next stories.

Writers Having Problems.

BOO WHO (2004) by Rene Gutteridge was about Wolfe "Boo" Boone of Skary, Indiana. Formerly a best-selling horror writer, his literary career crashed and burned. He was now a used-car salesman. The village had relied on him as a tourist attraction but was now equally down and out. Writer's block wasn't just Boone's problem.

To worsen matters, Boone's fiancee Ainsley Marie Parker was a candidate for a television show to replace Martha Stewart. (At the time the book was published, Stewart had just been sent to prison for insider trading.) Boone's editor Alfred Tennison had been fired by the publisher because his only producing author had dried up. He decided to become an agent and make Parker the next Martha.

Twas Christmas, and assorted villagers were fighting depression as they struggled to rebuild their livelihoods now that Skary was no longer a scary tourist draw. Except the mayor, who was now certifiably delusional. He had done the budget and knew the village was bankrupt. All too much for him.

The novel was a series of humourous anecdotes, often intersecting the lives of different characters. They struggled through their problems. They also created new problems, such as believing a local psychologist was cloning people and populating the village with them.

Most of the threads worked out okay, save that Parker didn't get her cooking show. The judges discovered she used artificial ingredients. The origin of Skary was revealed but villagers survived the shock of learning their village had been founded as a safe haven for reformed prostitutes.

That discovery inspired Boone to begin writing again, as he fictionalized the history into a novel. God was in his heaven and all was right with the world.

WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH MARY JANE? (2021) by Candas Jane Dorsey was about a nameless amateur sleuth to whom an old college classmate Priscilla Jane Gill applied for help.

Gill was a bestselling travel writer who feared she was being stalked. Not unreasonably so, since a year earlier she was attacked by a different deranged fan. The stalker was murdered outside Gill's book launch but that didn't end her troubles.

Nameless, if I can call her that, kept investigating and uncovered a conspiracy for which the MacGuffin was rather clever, smart paper. Indestructible, capable of holding electronic messages, and could be copied by cutting it in half. For all I know, it may actually exist.

A billionaire and his aide-de-camp had a rather bizarre conspiracy going which tied in with the smart paper. The denouement was a shoot-out between the killer and the police. No prizes for guessing who won.

"Sally The Bookworm" by William Link (2012 February, ELLERY QUEEN MYSTERY MAGAZINE) was about a hitman named Salvatore. He was hired by a capo Franco Calderella to kill an author Steve Addison.

The target was writing a roman a clef about Calderella, who feared the novel would expose details of the family operations. In addition to the hit, Salvatore was to retrieve the manuscript. He did the latter but killed the author's brother by mistake. However, when Salvatore read the manuscript, he saw nothing about Calderella, and suggested the matter be dropped.

Calderella read through the manuscript and agreed. Except that when the book came out, it was dedicated to Calderella. The Mafioso depicted was a poofter with other disconcerting habits. The capo would not be pleased.

Writer's Block.

BOX 13 was a syndicated radio series in 1947 and 1948. In those days, syndication meant each episode was transcribed to a vinyl LP and sold to radio stations, who could play it as many times as they liked. Available as free mp3s from the Old Time Radio Researchers at www.otrr.org/OTRRLibrary.

Dan Holiday was a mystery novelist who had trouble thinking of plots. He ran a classified ad in a newspaper that he was looking for adventure and would help people with their problems. His mailing address was in care of Box 13 at the newspaper.

"Daytime Nightmare" was written by Russell Hughes and aired in 1948, exact date unknown. Dan Holiday was invited by the letter writer Mr Waring to lunch regarding $10 million. The meal was drugged.

When Holiday woke up, he was in a sanitarium. The keeper Cordell called him Edward Stokes. Holiday was bound in a straitjacket, with his hair dyed. Cordell filled in Stokes' past history but told him he knew he was Dan Holiday.

Cordell was very helpful, secure in the knowledge that no one would believe anything Holiday said. The real Stokes was dead. Waring and Stokes' wife Mary visited later. The three were all part of a scheme. Holiday managed to escape, pursued hither and yon.

The ending was obvious and wrapped up a little too easily. The trio had murdered the real Stokes to claim his estate. They needed Holiday qua Stokes to die escaping from the sanitarium to allow the grieving widow to inherit without any suspicion of murder.

"Death Is No Joke" was written by Oran Blackstone and aired in 1948, exact date unknown. The letter writer Alex was an old friend of Dan Holiday, who invited him to the residence of Alex's cousin Bernard Pendler.

The family had a large inheritance in dispute. Someone was playing practical jokes that were going beyond jokes and becoming outright vicious. In the

absence of Bernard, the fortune would have been shared. He had been gone for 15 years before returning to claim the estate.

Henry and Martha were among the relatives. After introductions there was a scream from one of the rooms, that of Alex's wife Ruth. Someone left a snake in her closet. Then another apparent joke, when Bernard's high school yearbook had his photos cut out.

Lots of over-acting, in particular Ruth and Bernard. The jokes escalated to cutting the brake fluid line on a car, nearly killing Alex and Holiday. There was a confrontation out on the lake, where Martha was almost killed by Bernard because she knew he was an imposter.

She remembered the real Bernard, probably dead by now, was left-handed. The rest was up to the sheriff.

"Find Me, Find Death" was written by Russell Hughes and aired on 1948-12-05. The letter writer said he would find out who was behind Box 13, then kill him within four days. To be fair about the matter, he would also give him four days to prevent his murder.

Dan Holiday had to take the writer seriously. Consulting a psychiatrist didn't produce much except to pad out the script. The notes kept coming and the suspects multiplied.

Eventually Holiday identified the letter writer by taking a long trip on an inter-urban bus with many local stops. Since the killer was stalking him, Holiday figured when he got off the bus, the killer would follow.

The plan worked. Trevor was an egomaniac who said he had killed five others previously and got away with their murders. Trevor tried a locked room standoff but Holiday cheated by turning the room lights off.

Trevor kept bwah-ha!-ha!-ing in the dark, so Holiday found him by his voice and slugged him unconscious. In the epilogue, Trevor was in a different locked room, one controlled by men in white uniforms.

Book Clubs.

WRITTEN IN STONE (2012) by Ellery Adams (pseudonym of Jennifer Stanley) was a novel in a cozy series about Olivia Limoges of Oyster Bay, North Carolina. When a local woman Munin Cooper was murdered, Olivia and her book club, the Bayside Book Writers, leaped into the fray.

They were assisted by Olivia's boyfriend Rawlings, who was the chief of police and had the idea that he was in charge. Cooper had the reputation of a witch. There were several suspects and many back stories to uncover, mostly of a genealogical nature.

Olivia was diverted part of the time for the local food festival. Another death freshened the hunt. Other book clubs meet in member's homes and discuss novels. This group barged into police investigations and crime scenes.

The killer was working out personal problems the hard way. The epilogue was a meeting of the book club in a restaurant. The loose ends were explained away over pomegranate margaritas.

CRIMES AGAINST A BOOK CLUB (2017) by Kathy Cooperman (pseudonym of Kathy Chen) was about Annie Baker and Sarah Sloane. The duo were each in search of fast cash for personal reasons.

They decided to sell an anti-aging cream to members of a La Jolla book club. The members were rich women of a certain age who knew they were of a certain age and desperately struggled to look young.

The cream was ordinary face cream repackaged in fancy jars. Annie added an extra ingredient to ensure repeat orders. One gramme of cocaine per 40 grammes of lotion, at $1,000 per jar. The cocaine wasn't listed on the label.

The plan worked well for a time but eventually gang aft agley as plans so often do. The book club was devastated. So was Annie when the law came for her.

A BOOK CLUB TO DIE FOR (2022) by Dorothy St James was a novel in a cozy series about Trudell Becket of Cypress, South Carolina. She was an assistant librarian who had been invited to speak to the Arete Society, a snobby book club.

The murder victim, and there was one, was the club's president Rebecca White, a nasty woman who was not mourned. There were a plentitude of suspects. The book club politics were as vicious as anything in federal politics.

The television camera crew didn't help. They were originally there for a local news filler. Much to their delight they got a bigger story. Fortunately the incessant rain drove them away.

Becket found herself Marpleing. The past and present feuds dragged her in because some of her family and friends were involved. The book club only approved of elevated literature (their phrase).

The murderer had been caught reading romances. Rebecca White was going to expel her from the club for just cause. More than sufficient reason to kill in such literary circles.

Book Collectors.

DWELLERS OF THE DEEP (1970) by K.M O'Donnell (pseudonym of Barry Malzberg) was half of an Ace Double. The other novel was an unreadable story about an alien empire by a different author. I ploughed along in that one for a couple of chapters, then gave up on the story.

But first I suppose I should stop and explain what an Ace Double was, since the younger generations are unlikely to have seen them. These were mass market paperbacks with two short novels, published between 1952 and 1973.

The stories were back to front and upside-down to each other, what is known as tête-bêche format. After reading through one side, the reader then flipped the book over vertically and read (or not) the other story.

The novel at hand was a roman a clef about the feuds between New York City science fiction fans from the late 1930s to the1950s. Tempests in teapots, as local clubs squabbled with each other.

The science fiction historian Harry Warner Jr famously wrote that accounts of those feuds, written in white heat by fans, made World War Two seem like an anticlimax. Although DWELLERS will be funnier if you know fanhistory, the book stands on its own reasonably well.

I caught most of the references since I have read a lot of fanhistory but a younger reader will miss them. I'm not going to bother explaining them in this review. If you don't know them, you can still enjoy most of the humour. Otherwise go to www.fanac.org and browse around for fanhistory.

This novel was set in 1951 in New York City. Izzinius Fox was a lone-wolf collector obsessed with completing his file of science fiction magazines. He had no idea fandom existed until fellow tenant Susan Forsythe recruited him into the Solarians. They were a group of fans who thought themselves the centre of the fannish universe.

Fox was unemployed and, more seriously, was frequently kidnapped by the Rhelms, an alien species whose starship was orbiting Earth. Undetectable to human technology of course. Fox's frequent interrogations only lasted milliseconds in Earth time, but were quite extensive in real time on board the starship.

Thusly, no one noticed his frequent absences, although he had suffer in his own mind. He confided only in Forsythe. Since she was a fan, the story seemed plausible, especially when she noticed the after-effects on his movements.

The Rhelm were after a specific back issue of a science fiction magazine which contained an article by a man named Cupboard on the science of the mind. No relation to any faux religion who might sue the publisher. They believed the article would help them understand humans and thereby conquer Earth.

Trouble was, the issue was rare. Fox didn't have it nor could he get the item. The aliens didn't believe him. They kept snatching him and subjecting him to psychological heat.

The Solarians were riven by a great feud with the Plutonian club. The details were so trivial that the fans dared not speak of such things directly. Mostly the problems were power struggles, such as whose turn it was to be President of the club, which rotated monthly.

Eventually the plot lines tangled up with each other, then just fizzled out. The Rheum won, electing to nudge human society slowly into chaos and disintegration of social bonds. I'm glad such a thing couldn't happen in real life.

HOUND (2009) by Vincent McCaffrey was about Henry Sullivan, a freelance bookseller. He bought from estates and library sales in the Boston, Massachusetts, area and resold to collectors. He thereby earned a modest living.

Sullivan was called in to appraise a book collection of the late Heber Johnson, which were to be donated to a university library. The deceased's wife Morgan had a past history with Sullivan.

From there, the novel meandered, and that is the correct word, to the past and back again to the present. Sullivan's landlady died and he had to move because the rooming house was sold to cover estate taxes.

Morgan was murdered, so Sullivan went sleuthing, as did the police of course. Not a cozy but a noir. As Sullivan went about town, he uncovered gloom and doom in equal proportions with book lore infodumps. The novel basically fizzled out to an ending. Steady reading but not for a rainy Sunday afternoon when you are feeling depressed.

CODEX (2005) by Lew Grossman was about Edward Wozny, a rising young investment banker. He was side-tracked into helping a client sort out a private library long forgotten by the descendants.

In particular, the MacGuffin was a medieval codex that might be a hoax or the real thing. Lots of complacent old money and greedy new money. The plot was mainly a leisurely stroll through the methods of antiquarian book research.

The codex went with Wozny to its ancestral home and somehow vanished from the plot. The ending was indeterminate as Wozny considered his options for the future.

BIBLIOMYSTERIES (2017) was an anthology of 15 mysteries, edited by Otto Penzler. As the title suggested, the stories are related to the world of books and bookstores. To pick a few, I'll start with "An Acceptable Sacrifice" by Jeffery Deaver was about two drug agents assigned to kill a Mexican drug cartel leader.

He was a rare book collector, so they tracked him by his online purchases. The agents used a multiple-twist strategy of books delivered to him, one of which contained a bomb as a decoy. They got him with another booby trap, a rigged ebook reader.

"Book Club" by Loren D. Estleman was set in the town of Good Advice, New Mexico, where Lloyd Finster, a local book collector, had been murdered, possibly over the theft of a rare book. The search for the book, an iron-bound codex which was used to bash in Finster's skull, led to the culprit. A routine whodunit but an interesting idea where the stolen MacGuffin was also the murder weapon.

"Death Leaves A Bookmark" was by William Link, the co-creator of the famous television detective Columbo. In this story, Columbo was investigating the murder of a rich bookstore owner whose greedy nephew Troy Pellingham was the prime suspect.

The deed was done by toppling a heavy bookcase onto the old man, then finishing him off by bashing in his skull with a heavy book. Troy wiped the book cover clean and left it. What he missed and what Colombo found was his fingerprints on the page fore-edges.

THE BOOKMAN'S PROMISE (2004) by John Dunning was part of a series about Cliff Janeway of Denver, Colorado. A former policeman, he was now a bookman, searching out rare editions for his clients in his travels.

Pause for digression. The author John Dunning is well known to old-time radio fans for his reference book ON THE AIR, an encyclopedia of thousands of old radio series. I have a copy, which is a doorstop tome of 822 pages, and frequently consult it. The book was his only non-fiction work.

Meanwhile, back at the plot, Janeway had recently bought a rare 3-volume narrative by Richard Burton. The explorer, not the actor. Discussing the books with a radio talk show host, Janeway mentioned they had a handwritten inscription from Burton to Charlie Warren, dated 1861.

That brought an elderly woman Josephine Gallant out of the woodwork. She claimed the books had once belonged to her grandfather Warren, who collected Burton's books and was a good friend. She wanted Janeway to find the missing collection of Burton's works.

Included was a hitherto unknown handwritten journal. detailing Burton's trip through the American South in the spring of 1860. This was the MacGuffin of the plot.

Janeway went traveling along the eastern seaboard, meeting assorted characters and corpses along the way. Others were chasing the journal. Lots of twists, plus heirs demanding what they thought was theirs, and, near the finish, lots of violence.

A cozy this wasn't. The journal was burned by an angry recipient, the murderer committed suicide, and the novel slowly fizzled out.

THE BOOKWOMAN'S LAST FLING (2006) had Cliff Janeway appraising a collection of first-edition children's books, from the estate of Candice Geiger. Upon evaluating them, he discovered that many valuable items had been replaced with reprints.

The chase was on, out to Idaho, where Candice's daughter had a ranch and some of the books. From there the story veered to California race tracks, mainly, I suspect, because Dunning had worked in the stables in his younger days and wanted to cram in the stuff.

The cast of supporting characters slowly increased and so did the death toll. Candice had been murdered by a bookman. The killer was a bibliomaniac, a book hoarder. The kind who, after filling his house with books, then rented a warehouse for more books, then another. Not just rare books but ex-library and secondhand paperbacks.

The ending was on a down note. The dead couldn't be re-issued in a new and improved edition.

Bookselling.

AUNT DIMITY BEATS THE DEVIL (2000) by Nancy Atherton was the seventh novel in a series about Lori Shepherd, a bookseller in England. She was called to Wyrdhurst Hall in darkest Northumberland to appraise a private library.

This book was a typical manor house mystery, with lots of fog and rain to depress even the most cheerful soul. The gimmick of this series was that Lori got advice from a ghost named Aunt Dimity, who could only communicate by writing in a blank journal.

A guest at Wyrdhurst Hall was Adam Chase, a handsome stud who rented a nearby shack so he could write great novels in peace and quiet. That idea, plus the book appraisals of Lori, fell by the wayside as assorted alarums and excursions occurred.

Lori discovered World War One letters written home by a soldier, which were entangled in a treasure hunt. The chase was on and the loot was found in the denouement. Happy days were here again for the manor, if not for some of the characters.

THE GHOST AND THE HAUNTED PORTRAIT (2021) by Cleo Coyle (pseudonym of Alice Alfonsi and Marc Cerasini) was a novel in a cozy series about Penelope Thornton-McClure of Quindicott, Rhode Island. She and her aunt Sadie Thompson co-owned a haunted bookstore.

The resident ghost was Jack Shepard, who had been a private investigator in the building during the 1940s before he was murdered. He came in handy for Marpleing.

The plot began when Penelope put together a collection of pulp fiction book covers. The original artwork, one of which attracted particular attention. A fanatic bought the painting but other fanatics wanted it even more.

The bloodshed and mayhem kept Penelope and Jack busy. He was still partially trapped in the 1940s, so the novel switched back and forth. Since two men were murdered in the present time, the police were also making enquiries.

The painting had been coded and led to a treasure. Not gold or silver but a document proving the richest family in the county owed half their estate to a young man who was the rightful heir.

The document was unveiled in a ceremony at the bookstore. Half the county jammed inside for the unveiling. Certainly a boost for business. Lots of loose threads were tied off in the epilogue, mainly by pulling out one tomato surprise after another.

SMILE BEACH MURDER (2022) by Alicia Bessette was the first novel in a cozy series about Callie Padget of Cattail Island in the Outer Banks of North Carolina.

The standard scenario set the stage. Laid off from a big-city job, came home to recuperate, and wound up working in the village bookstore. The economics were also standard cozy. Bookstores struggle in cities but make enough in villages to support a Miss Marple and several staff, plus pay her mortgage.

Callie's mother had died in a fall from the local lighthouse years ago. When a local shopkeeper Eva Meeks died the same way, Callie became the village's Jessica Fletcher.

Evidence suggested Eva had become involved in a treasure hunt. The Outer Banks are littered with shipwrecks, so the belief was plausible. As a newcomer, Callie spent much of the novel catching up with old acquaintances and digging out family feuds.

She read a lot of books, as a store on a thinly populated barrier island wasn't going to have much business. She did do some sleuthing via Google, so presumably the bookstore had some Internet sales as well.

Meanwhile, another death, with an incorrect suspect, then twists leading to others. Callie upheld the cozy tradition of trapping herself with the real killer. She survived only because she was scheduled for a sequel.

In the denouement, the treasure turned out to be a forgotten and failed publicity stunt from a few decades back. The supposed documents providing clues were just advertising.

THE BURNING PAGES (2022) by Paige Shelton carried on the saga of the Cracked Spine bookshop in Edinburgh, Scotland. Delaney Nichols and her co-worker Hamlet attended a Burns night in a cottage near the bookshop. Her husband Tom owned a pub but would be busy serving a wedding party.

Delaney's boss Edwin MacAlister, owner of the bookstore, declined to attend the Burns night. He warned Delaney that some of those attending bore a grudge against them. Twenty years ago, a local bookstore burned down from arson and a few people suspected him of the unsolved crime.

The dinner had its share of unpleasant moments, culminating afterward with the cottage burning down after the participants had dispersed. Delaney and Hamlet had left long before then but the discovery of a body in the charred ruins made Hamlet a suspect.

Meanwhile, Delaney was researching the provenance of some books received at the shop, stirring up trouble as she did so. That eventually tied in with the murder and Hamlet's connections to the deceased.

A MacGuffin then appeared, a manuscript supposedly written by Robert Burns himself. Another fire, this time at the Cracked Spine, but it was quickly extinguished. The security camera caught the perpetrator, the wife of the owner of the bookstore that had been torched twenty years ago.

Plus, back then Hamlet was a toddler who lived in a foster home across the street. The killer had tried to adopt him but failed, and held a grudge ever since. She blabbed a very lengthy confession covering events then and now.

The wrap-up was Burns' poem "Address To A Haggis", commemorating one of the most indigestible foods invented by humans. Speirs is a Scottish name. My father's ancestors emigrated to Canada in 1830 from Houston, Scotland. None of us have eaten haggis in the last five generations and we do not consider ourselves poorer for that.

CLAUSE OF DEATH (2022) by Lorna Barrett continued the saga of sisters Tricia and Angelica Miles, who were now co-presidents of the Chamber of Commerce in Stoneham, New Hampshire. The village's reputation as Booktown was under siege by non-bookstore boutiques such as a craft brewery.

Eli Meier campaigned against the intruders. He occupied a bookstore specializing in New Age religions and conspiracy theories. Soon enough, all he occupied was a cemetery plot. Angelica was a suspect so Tricia went Marpleing.

When the police ran Meier's fingerprints, they came back as Joseph Martin, on the lam for decades. Tricia kept snooping about, remarking in Chapter 12: "*Believe me, there are no secrets around here.*" That was probably why there were so many murders in the village. Shots were fired in the denouement after the murderer told the Miles sisters she done it. A bloodier ending than usual for a cozy.

A COLORFUL SCHEME (2022) by Krista Davis was the fourth novel in a cozy series about Florrie Fox of Washington, District of Columbia. She earned her living at a bookstore specializing in colouring books, proving once again there is no trade that a Miss Marple can't earn a living from.

Her boss John Maxwell was marrying romance author Jacqueline Liebhaber at his mansion. The cast included a variety of authors, some successful, some not. Arthur Bedlingham was among the latter. When his assistant Evan McDowell was murdered, Florrie and the police leaped into action.

There were plenty of back stories, mostly based on jealousy over each other's book sales or what kind of reviews they got from critics. The denouement put many of the characters in hospital or at least requiring first aid.

The killer had a scheme to replace Bedlingham with an imposter but had to get McDowell out of the way. She was going to hijack his life, finances, and writings, an extreme method of identity theft.

RADIO FICTION: PART 15
by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 14 appeared in OPUNTIAs #301, 302, 310, 319, 330, 353, 370, 377, 394, 411, 443, 473, 489, and 516.]

In the 1920s and early 1930s, broadcast radio was for that generation of humans what personal computers were in the 1980s and 1990s. As the technology improved, more and more people had radios, until the geeks who pioneered broadcasting receded into the background. Radio became mainstream, just as smartphones and laptops are today.

Pre-announced commercial scheduled programmes in North America first began in May 1920 at XWA Montréal, later CFCF and discontinued in 2010. The Americans followed with KDKA Pittsburgh in November 1920.

By 1922, amateur radio was a booming hobby. Most participants were adults but thousands of teenagers swarmed the airwaves like an early Twitter. There was a good market for fiction about teenaged broadcasters in the Tom Swift mode.

Kids' Stuff.

Tom Swift was but one of many action-adventure series aimed at tweenies and teenagers back in the day. Boys and girls having adventures with superscience radios made for several series of novels. The books mentioned here are but samples of many available as free downloads from www.gutenberg.org

THE OCEAN WIRELESS BOYS OF THE ICEBERG PATROL (1915) by Captain Wilbur Lawton (pseudonym of John Henry Goldfrap) crammed in everything from icebergs to deserted islands. The sinking of the Titanic was only three years past when this novel was published and World War One was well underway at the time.

The hero was Jack Ready, a young lad who got a berth on a new freighter as the wireless operator. In his spare time, he was working on a new portable radio that would weigh only 50 pounds and could be carried in a backpack. It came with a collapsible kite to carry the aerial antenna. Superscience for those days.

The ship was crossing the North Atlantic, so icebergs were the big topic. As Jack mused: "*Not many weeks before a big liner had blundered at night into a huge floating continent of ice and had sunk, with a terrible toll of lives and suffering.*", which made me wonder about the chronology of this novel since the reference could only be to the 1912 sinking of the Titanic.

Jack may have been ready, but the captain was drunk and told the first officer to go full speed ahead and damn the icebergs. At that moment the novel paused to recapitulate the previous books in the series, THE OCEAN WIRELESS BOYS ON THE ATLANTIC and THE OCEAN WIRELESS BOYS AND THE LOST LINER. Then they scraped an iceberg, a man went overboard, and the alarums piled on.

Billy Raynor, apprentice engineer, was the one who tumbled overboard. He swam to an iceberg which he found inhabited by a polar bear. Meanwhile, back at the ship, the crew was planning a mutiny.

And so forth. Pages would be needed to summarize the plot but lots of action there was. I spotted one error when the author wrote about the ship heading into port at Saint Johns, Nova Scotia, which would actually be in the province of New Brunswick if Saint John or Newfoundland if Saint John's. In any event, all ended well.

Girls were not neglected. Margaret Penrose (house name of Stratemeyer Syndicate) wrote a series about the Radio Girls. They were early-teenage girls Jessie Norwood, Nell Stanley, and Amy Drew.

THE RADIO GIRLS ON THE PROGRAM (1922) was an action-adventure for girls, with alarums hither and yon. The basic plot was a rivalry between the three and another pair who were always plotting dastardly things to interfere with their broadcasts. The big event was a musical recital over a professional station. The bad girls tried to sabotage the recital but the good girls won.

THE RADIO GIRLS ON STATION ISLAND (1922) picked up after the radio girls had just concluded their broadcast concert. As was standard for Stratemeyer novels, the plot came to a dead stop while the previous novels were summarized.

From there, the girls were off on a steam yacht to visit an island. There were episodic alarums along the way, and the radio got a good workout. The final chapter was "Saved By Radio" as the good ship was in peril. Just as the batteries failed, the plucky radio girls got a message out and were rescued. All was well that ended well.

Weird Sounds.

"Symphony Of The Damned" by John R. Speer (1937 April, WEIRD TALES, available as a free pdf from www.archive.org) was about orchestral music broadcast over a radio programme based on black magic. The mad conductor Helgar Gaudet had his opera financed by Rodney Prisney. Both were in love with the principal diva Maria Martell, and thereby the conflict began.

At rehearsal, an old witch named Morella hobbled into the concert hall and told Gaudet the opera would fail, as indeed it did the following night. She reappeared after the fiasco, this time as a beautiful woman bearing a medieval manuscript of music that she called "The Black Song". Gaudet could have it if he sold his soul, and with it, fame and fortune.

He performed with an orchestra of shapeshifters who were feral dogs when off duty. Most of the music was enrapturing, but the finale drove listeners mad. He normally only played the good part but gave private audiences to his enemies with the full recitation to drive them hopelessly insane.

In medieval times, the Black Song could only affect those within the concert hall. Gaudet and Morella wanted revenge in different ways for different causes. What better method than to wipe out entire populations listening to the song on the radio?

Prisney raced to the broadcast studio to stop the performance and succeeded. Gaudet and Morella were consigned to the nether hells. The song would not be heard again.

Funny Sounds.

THE SEALTEST VILLAGE STORE, sponsored by Sealtest Ice Cream, had a long and complicated history. The show originally began as THE RUDY VALLEE SHOW. When Vallee enlisted during the war, the series went through several sponsors, name changes, and hosts before Sealtest bought in.

For the episode mentioned here, Jack Carson had become the host, assisted by Eve Arden, who soon left to become the star of her own radio series. At this point the series was a comedy/variety show with three or four musical numbers. Available from the Old Time Radio Researchers as free mp3s from www.otrr.org/OTRRLibrary

"Jack Plans To Buy A Radio Station" aired on 1948-05-27. In the opening dialogue of this episode, Jack told Eve that he had been at a broadcasting convention. He got to talking with one of the delegates who offered him a chance to buy into a country radio station as a partner.

Jack offered Eve a share of the buy-in but she said she was a city girl (true; born and raised in urban southern California). Jack waxed nostalgic about life in a rural village but Eve remained uninterested.

There was a pause for a since-forgotten chanteuse to sing an equally forgettable ballad, then a 2-minute commercial for, no, not Sealtest ice cream, but Kraft cottage cheese. That had me baffled. Why wasn't Sealtest advertising on the Sealtest show?

Coming back to the skit, Eve's objections were interrupted by a woman who apologized and told them she couldn't find the studio for the show MR KEEN: TRACER OF LOST PERSONS. That was a real radio series, and the reference got a laugh from the studio audience.

Thence to a rehearsal for what the country station would sound like. This was a litany of corn-pone jokes, wrapping up with an appeal to children to help support the station by sending in weekly $50 cheques to the station address in Mexico City.

Next was a parody of soap opera, not difficult to do since soap operas are parodies of themselves. Having run out of ideas, the episode ended with another cottage cheese commercial, not a parody but dead serious alas.

No Sounds.

DEAD AIR (2017) by David A Poulsen should not be confused with four different novels using the same title that I reviewed in issue #319 of this zine. For one thing, this novel was set in southern Alberta, mostly Calgary and High River, which is a half-hour drive south.

Mike Cobb was a private detective hired as a bodyguard to protect right-wing radio host Buckley-Rand Larmer. The author skirted libel laws by a thin edge when he mentioned that Larmer broadcast on Right Talk 700 AM.

That will mean nothing to outlanders but Calgary's most popular radio station is News Talk 770 AM. Alberta's current premier is Danielle Smith, leader of the United Conservative Party and conspiracy theorist. Prior to joining the UCP she was a talk show host on 770 AM.

Be that as it may, Cobb asked journalist Adam Cullen to investigate Larmer's background. Not surprisingly there was no shortage of enemies. When Larmer's colleague Jasper Hugg was murdered, the broadcaster was charged with the crime.

Cobb and Cullen turned up stories of other radio show hosts being shot elsewhere in Canada, suggesting a serial killer. Along the way, lots of Calgary streets and shops were name-checked, including my own neighbourhood Marda Loop.

There were lots of suspects with reasons but the final result was Larmer had been diddling with a married woman. He got off the murder charge and returned to radio with a ratings boost. There was, however, one neat little twist at the end when he was blackmailed to march in the gay pride parade to keep his affair quiet.

Radio On Television.

MONK aired on television from 2002 until 2009. This was a comedy drama series about private investigator Adrian Monk, who worked mainly as a consultant to the San Francisco Police Department. He had previously been a police officer but became unhinged after his wife Trudy was murdered.

He was given a medical discharge but occasionally hired by SFPD as a consultant. Adrian Monk developed severe obsessive-compulsive disorder and was a germophobe. He could and did take scattered seemingly irrelevant clues at a crime scene and link them in logical order to identify the culprit.

"Mr Monk Is On The Air" was a Season 5 episode written by Josh Siegal and Dylan Morgan which aired on 2007-02-02. The episode opened with the discovery of a woman's body in her house asphyxiated by natural gas from a fireplace valve.

Her husband was a radio shock jock who was on the air at the time of her death. He was a crude boy, at the time interviewing a well-endowed starlet whose movie had just been released. He kept using the phrase "*Jiggle me timbers!*".

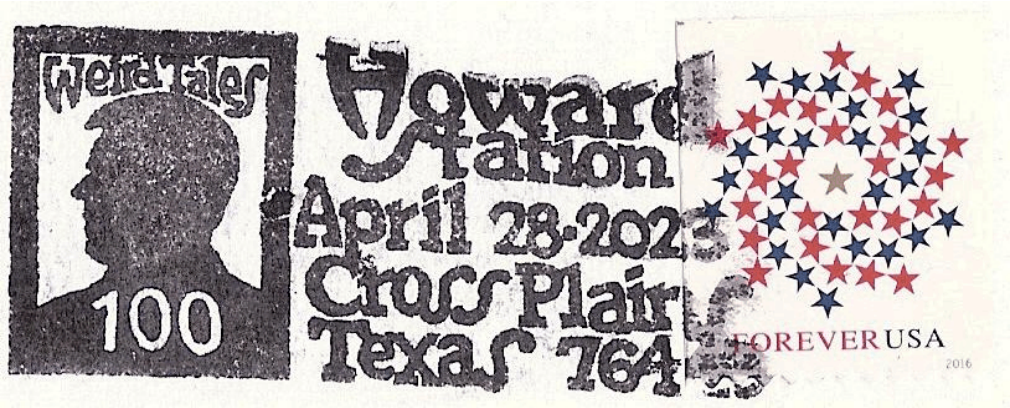
Monk was called in to the investigation. Along the way he made a fool of himself on the airwaves but finally noticed the vital clue. When visiting the house of the deceased, he noticed a dog that became hyperactive when the jiggle phrase was used.

The radio jock had, over a considerable period of time, trained the dog to race into the bedroom, open the fireplace gas valve, then close the door on the way out. The wife was a heavy sleeper and hadn't known about the dog's trick, nor would she ever. The dog would only do the trick when the jiggle phrase was used.

She had the radio on while sleeping, tuned to her husband's programme. When he used the jiggle phrase on his show, the dog went into action. An incredibly elaborate method of murder, the kind found only in Hollywood and British manor house mysteries.

THIS JUST IN
by Dale Speirs

As a philatelist I often send away for commemorative postmarks. Each year the Cross Plains, Texas, post office issues a postmark for their native son Robert E. Howard. This year's postmark honoured the centennial of the pulp magazine WEIRD TALES, where Howard published many of his stories.



WORLD WIDE PARTY ON JUNE 21

Founded by Benoit Girard (Quebec) and Franz Miklis (Austria) in 1994, the World Wide Party is held on June 21st every year. 2023 will be the 30th year of the WWP. Mark your calendars now!

At 21h00 local time, everyone is invited to raise a glass and toast fellow members of zinedom around the world. It is important to have it exactly at 21h00 your time. The idea is to get a wave of fellowship circling the planet. Rescheduling it to a club meeting or more convenient time negates the idea of a wave of celebration by SF fans and zinesters circling the globe.

At 21h00, face to the east and salute those who have already celebrated. Then face north, then south, and toast those in your time zone who are celebrating as you do. Finally, face west and raise a glass to those who will celebrate WWP in the next hour.

Raise a glass, publish a one-shot zine, have a party, or do a mail art project for the WWP. Let me know how you celebrated the day.

SEEN IN THE LITERATURE

Astronomy.

Zhang, S., et al (2023) **Inspiraling streams of enriched gas observed around a massive galaxy 11 billion years ago.** SCIENCE 380:doi.org/10.1126/science.abj9192

Authors' abstract: *Stars form in galaxies, from gas that has been accreted from the intergalactic medium. Simulations have shown that recycling of gas, the reaccretion of gas that was previously ejected from a galaxy, could sustain star formation in the early Universe.*

We observe the gas surrounding a massive galaxy at redshift 2.3 and detect emission lines from neutral hydrogen, helium, and ionized carbon that extend 100 kiloparsecs from the galaxy. The kinematics of this circumgalactic gas is consistent with an inspiraling stream.

The carbon abundance indicates that the gas had already been enriched with elements heavier than helium, previously ejected from a galaxy. We interpret the results as evidence of gas recycling during high-redshift galaxy assembly.

Wiseman, P., et al (2023) **Multiwavelength observations of the extraordinary accretion event AT2021lwx.** MONTHLY NOTICES OF THE ROYAL ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY 522:doi.org/10.1093/mnras/stad1000 (available as a free pdf)

Authors' abstract: *We present observations from X-ray to mid-infrared wavelengths of the most energetic non-quasar transient ever observed, AT2021lwx.*

Our data show a single optical brightening by a factor > 100 to a luminosity of 7×10^{45} *erg* s^{-1} *and a total radiated energy of* 1.5×10^{53} *erg, both greater than any known optical transient. The decline is smooth and exponential and the ultraviolet-optical spectral energy distribution resembles a black body with a temperature of* 1.2×10^{4} *K.*

Tentative X-ray detections indicate a secondary mode of emission, while a delayed mid-infrared flare points to the presence of dust surrounding the

transient. The spectra are similar to recently discovered optical flares in known active galactic nuclei but lack some characteristic features.

The lack of emission for the previous 7 years is inconsistent with the short-term, stochastic variability observed in quasars, while the extreme luminosity and long time-scale of the transient disfavour the disruption of a single solar-mass star.

The luminosity could be generated by the disruption of a much more massive star, but the likelihood of such an event occurring is small. A plausible scenario is the accretion of a giant molecular cloud by a dormant black hole of 10^8 to 10^9 solar masses. AT2021lwx thus represents an extreme extension of the known scenarios of black hole accretion.

Planets.

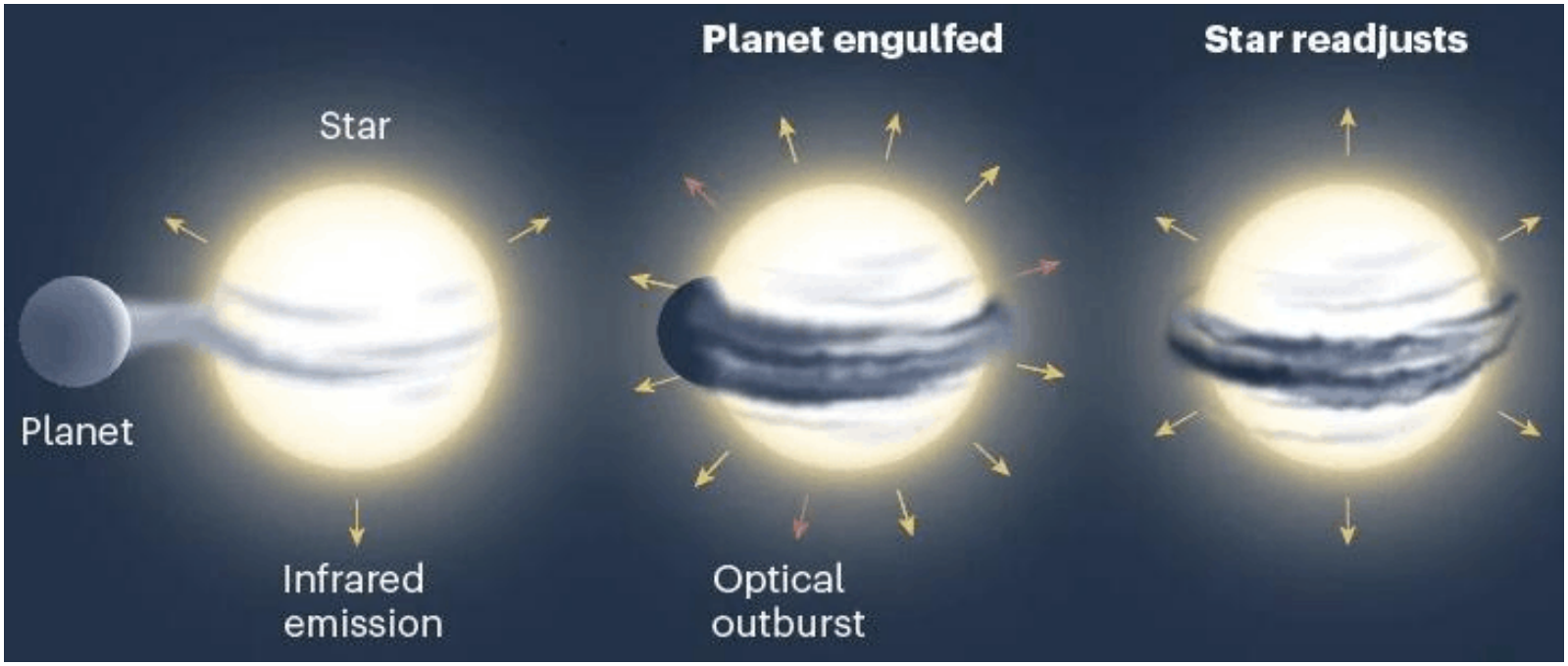
De, K., et al (2023) **An infrared transient from a star engulfing a planet.** NATURE 617:doi.org/10.1038/s41586-023-05842-x

Authors' abstract: *Planets with short orbital periods (roughly under 10 days) are common around stars like the Sun. Stars expand as they evolve and thus we expect their close planetary companions to be engulfed, possibly powering luminous mass ejections from the host star. However, this phase has never been directly observed.*

Here we report observations of ZTF SLRN-2020, a short-lived optical outburst in the Galactic disk accompanied by bright and long-lived infrared emission. The resulting light curve and spectra share striking similarities with those of red novae, a class of eruptions now confirmed to arise from mergers of binary stars.

Its exceptionally low optical luminosity (approximately 10^{35} erg per second) and radiated energy (approximately 6.5×10^{41} erg) point to the engulfment of a planet of fewer than roughly ten Jupiter masses by its Sun-like host star.

We estimate the Galactic rate of such subluminous red novae to be roughly between 0.1 and several per year. Future Galactic plane surveys should routinely identify these, showing the demographics of planetary engulfment and the ultimate fate of planets in the inner Solar System.



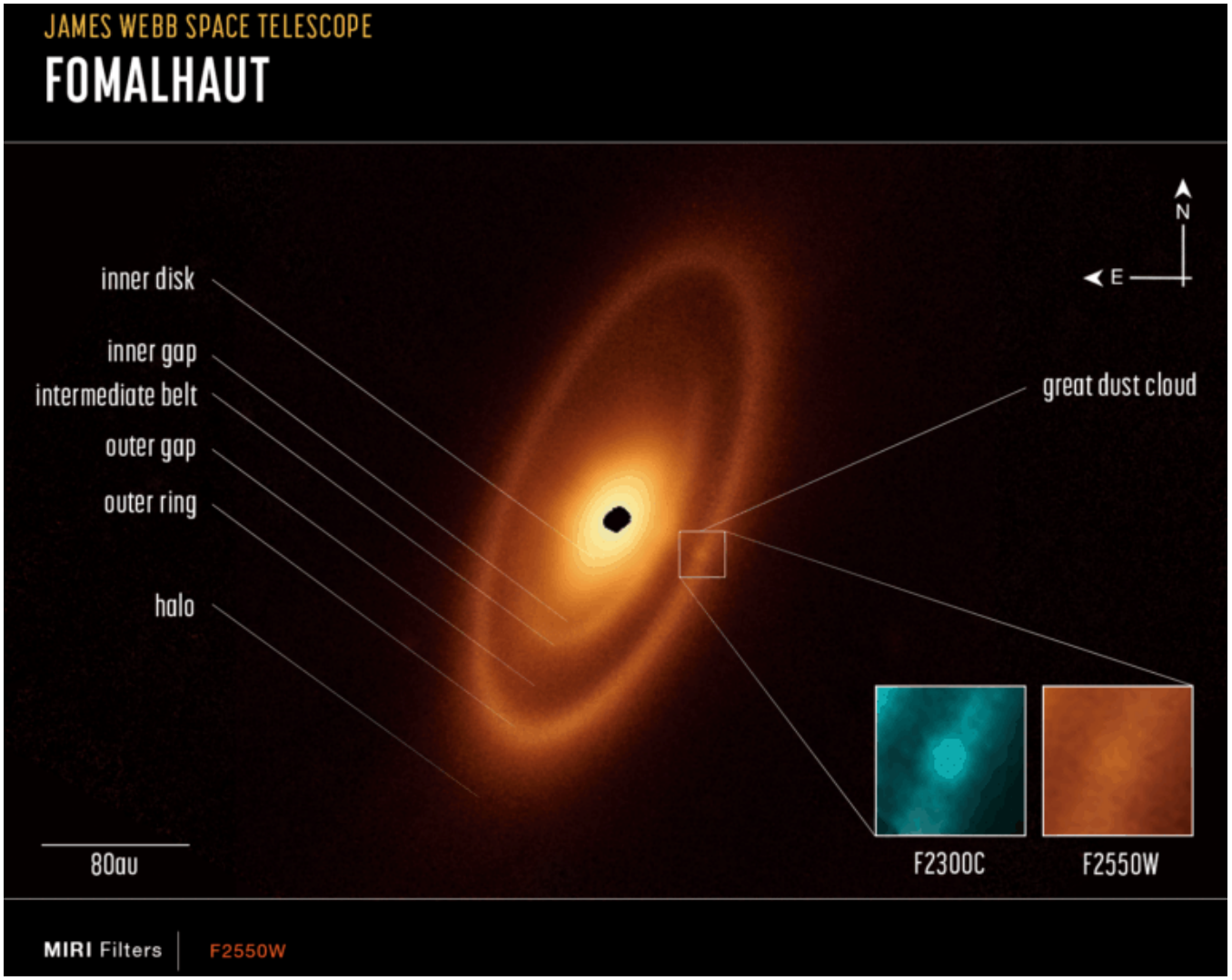
Gáspár, A., et al (2023) **Spatially resolved imaging of the inner Fomalhaut disk using JWST/MIRI.** NATURE ASTRONOMY 7:doi.org/10.1038/s41550-023-01962-6

Authors' abstract: *Planetary debris disks around other stars are analogous to the asteroid and Kuiper belts in the Solar System. Their structure reveals the configuration of small bodies and provides hints for the presence of planets.*

The nearby star Fomalhaut hosts one of the most prominent debris disks, resolved by the Hubble Space Telescope, Spitzer, Herschel and the Atacama Large Millimeter Array. Images of this system at mid-infrared wavelengths using JWST/MIRI not only show the narrow Kuiper belt-analogue outer ring, but also that (1) what was thought from indirect evidence to be an asteroid-analogue structure is instead broad, extending outward into the outer system, and (2) there is an intermediate belt, probably shepherded by an unseen planet.

The newly discovered belt is demarcated by an inner gap, located at ~78 AU, and it is misaligned relative to the outer belt. The previously known collisionally generated dust cloud, Fomalhaut b, could have originated from this belt, suggesting increased dynamical stirring and collision rates there.

We also discovered a large dust cloud within the outer ring, possible evidence of another dust-creating collision. Taken together with previous observations, Fomalhaut appears to be the site of a complex and possibly dynamically active planetary system.



Qin, X., et al (2023) **Modern water at low latitudes on Mars: Potential evidence from dune surfaces.** SCIENCE ADVANCES 9:10.1126/sciadv.add8868 (available as a free pdf)

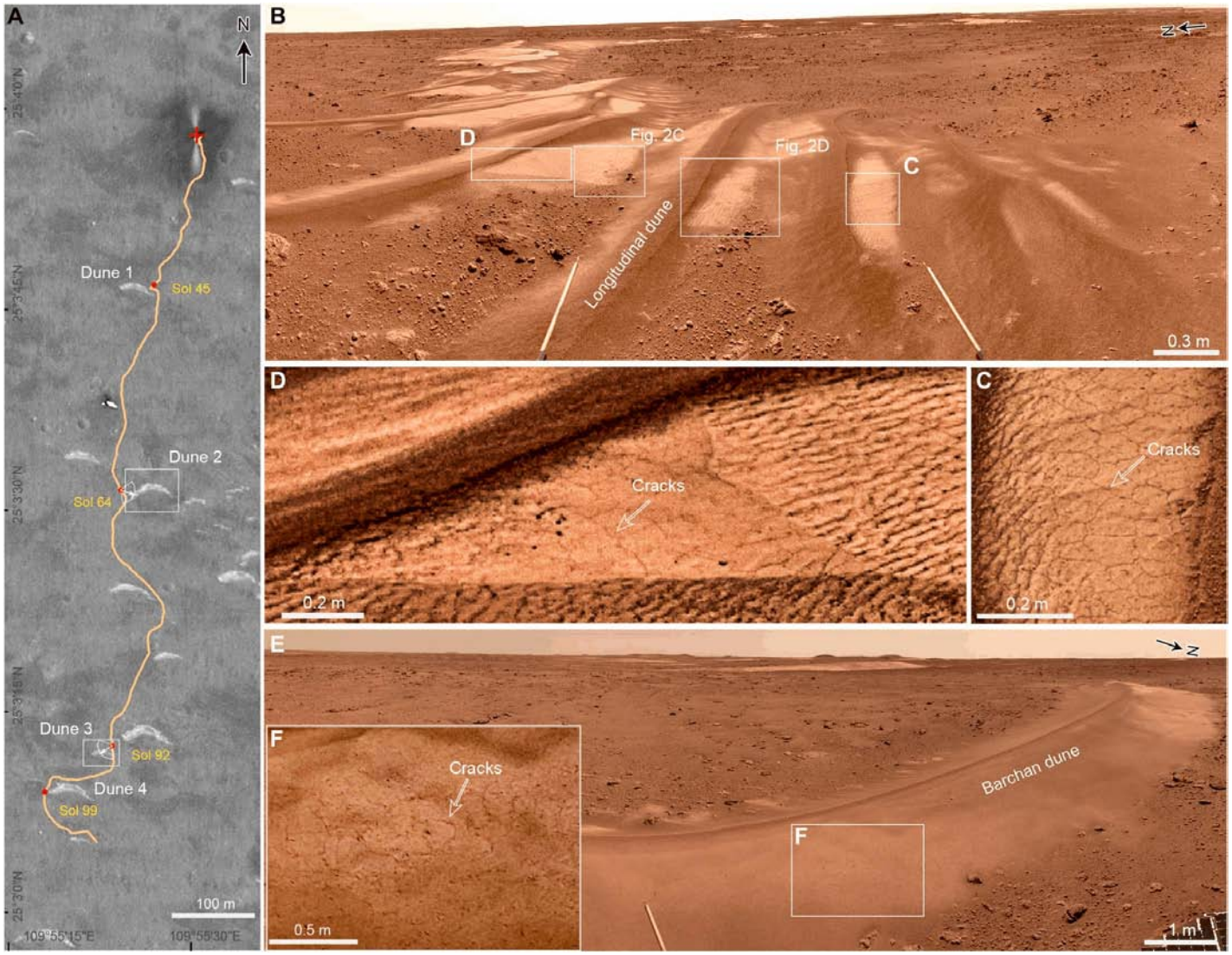
Authors' abstract: *Landforms on the Martian surface are critical to understanding the nature of surface processes in the recent past. However, modern hydroclimatic conditions on Mars remain enigmatic, as explanations for the formation of observed landforms are ambiguous.*

We report crusts, cracks, aggregates, and bright polygonal ridges on the surfaces of hydrated salt-rich dunes of southern Utopia Planitia (~25˚N) from in situ exploration by the Zhurong rover.

These surface features were inferred to form after 1.4 to 0.4 million years ago. Wind and CO2 frost processes can be ruled out as potential mechanisms. Instead, involvement of saline water from thawed frost/snow is the most likely cause.

This discovery sheds light on more humid conditions of the modern Martian climate and provides critical clues to future exploration missions searching for signs of extant life, particularly at low latitudes with comparatively warmer, more amenable surface temperatures.

[Images are from this paper.]



Kempf, S., et al (2023) **Micrometeoroid infall onto Saturn's rings constrains their age to no more than a few hundred million years.** SCIENCE ADVANCES 9:doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.adf8537 (available as a free pdf)

Authors' abstract: *There is ongoing debate as to whether Saturn's main rings are relatively young or ancient, having been formed shortly after Saturn or during the Late Heavy Bombardment. The rings are mostly water-ice but are polluted by non-icy material with a volume fraction ranging from ~0.1 to 2%.*

Continuous bombardment by micrometeoroids exogenic to the Saturnian system is a source of this non-icy material. Knowledge of the incoming mass flux of these pollutants allows estimation of the rings' exposure time, providing a limit on their age.

Here we report the final measurements by Cassini's Cosmic Dust Analyzer of the micrometeoroid flux into the Saturnian system. Several populations are present, but the flux is dominated by low-relative velocity objects such as from the Kuiper belt.

We find a mass flux from which we infer a ring exposure time about 100 to 400 million years in support of recent ring formation scenarios.

The Saturnian rings are the brightest of the four ring systems of the solar system owing to their nearly pristine water-ice composition (>95% by mass) and are easily the heaviest having a total mass a little less than half the mass of the moon Mimas.

Because the ring mass covers a surface area 10^4 to 10^5 times greater than a moon of equal mass, the rings are extremely susceptible to bombardment by micrometeoroids exogenic to the Saturnian system, which deliver impurities and gradually darken initially bright icy rings over time.

The resulting ring color and albedo variations with radial distance from Saturn provide a key for constraining the ring age.

Asteroids.

Takir, D., et al (2-23) **Late accretion of Ceres-like asteroids and their implantation into the outer main belt.** NATURE ASTRONOMY 7:doi.org/10.1038/s41550-023-01898-x

[Albedo is the reflectance of a non-luminous astronomical object. The higher the albedo, the brighter the object's reflectance. 1 AU is the median distance between Earth and the Sun.]

Authors' abstract: *Low-albedo asteroids preserve a record of the primordial Solar System planetesimals and the conditions in which the solar nebula was active. However, the origin and evolution of these asteroids are not well constrained.*

Here we measured visible and near-infrared spectra of low-albedo asteroids in the mid-outer main belt. We show that numerous large (diameter >100 km) and dark (geometric albedo <0.09) asteroids exterior to the dwarf planet Ceres' orbit share the same spectral features, and presumably compositions, as Ceres.

We also developed a thermal evolution model that demonstrates that these Ceres-like asteroids have highly porous interiors, accreted relatively late at 1.5–3.5 megayears after the formation of calcium-aluminium-rich inclusions, and experienced maximum interior temperatures of <900 K.

Ceres-like asteroids are localized in a confined heliocentric region between about 3.0 AU and 3.4 AU, but were probably implanted from more distant regions of the Solar System during the giant planet's dynamical instability.

Paleobiology.

Ros-Rocher, N., et al (2023) **Chemical factors induce aggregative multicellularity in a close unicellular relative of animals.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 120:doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2216668120 (available as a free pdf)

Authors' abstract: *Regulated cellular aggregation is an essential process for development and healing in many animal tissues. In some animals and a few distantly related unicellular species, cellular aggregation is regulated by diffusible chemical cues.*

However, it is unclear whether regulated cellular aggregation was part of the life cycles of the first multicellular animals and/or their unicellular ancestors. To fill this gap, we investigated the triggers of cellular aggregation in one of animals' closest unicellular living relatives, the filasterean Capsaspora owczarzaki.

We discovered that Capsaspora aggregation is induced by chemical cues, as observed in some of the earliest branching animals and other unicellular species. Specifically, we found that calcium ions and lipids present in lipoproteins function together to induce aggregation of viable Capsaspora cells.

We also found that this multicellular stage is reversible as depletion of the cues triggers disaggregation, which can be overcome upon reinduction. Our finding demonstrates that chemically regulated aggregation is important across diverse members of the holozoan clade. Therefore, this phenotype was plausibly integral to the life cycles of the unicellular ancestors of animals.

Hou, J.B., et al (2023) **Gill grooming in middle Cambrian and Late Ordovician trilobites.** GEOLOGICAL MAGAZINE 160:doi.org/10.1017/S001675682300002X

Authors' abstract: *Efficient extraction of oxygen from ambient waters played a critical role in the development of early arthropods.*

Maximizing gill surface area enhanced oxygen uptake ability but, with gills necessarily exposed to the external environment, also presented the issue of gill contamination.

Here we document setae inserted on the dorsal surface of walking legs of the benthic-dwelling middle Cambrian Olenoides serratus and on the gill shaft of the Late Ordovician Triarthrus eatoni.

Based on their physical positions relative to gill filaments, we interpret these setae to have been used to groom the gills, removing particles trapped among the filaments.

The coordination between setae and gill filaments is comparable to that seen among modern crustaceans, which use a diverse set of setae-bearing appendages to penetrate between gill filaments when grooming. Grooming is known relatively early in trilobite evolutionary history and would have enhanced gill efficiency by maximizing the surface area for oxygen uptake.

Yumimoto, K., et al (2023) **Molecular evolution of Keap1 was essential for adaptation of vertebrates to terrestrial life.** SCIENCE ADVANCES 9:doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.adg2379 (available as a free pdf)

[The Keap1 gene activates anti-oxidant reactions to protect cells from oxygen corrosion where it is not wanted.]

Authors' abstract: *Reactive oxygen species (ROS) posed a risk for the transition of vertebrates from aquatic to terrestrial life. How ancestral organisms adapted to such ROS exposure has remained a mystery.*

Here, we show that attenuation of the activity of the ubiquitin ligase CRL3Keap1 for the transcription factor Nrf2 during evolution was key to development of an efficient response to ROS exposure.

The Keap1 gene was duplicated in fish to give rise to Keap1A and the only remaining mammalian paralog Keap1B, the latter of which shows a lower affinity for Cul3 and contributes to robust Nrf2 induction in response to ROS exposure.

Mutation of mammalian Keap1 to resemble zebrafish Keap1A resulted in an attenuated Nrf2 response, and most knock-in mice expressing such a Keap1 mutant died on exposure as neonates to sunlight-level ultraviolet radiation. Our results suggest that molecular evolution of Keap1 was essential for adaptation to terrestrial life.

Matthew, O.S., et al (2023) **A macroevolutionary pathway to megaherbivory.** SCIENCE 380:doi.org/10.1126/science.ade1833

Authors' abstract: *Several scenarios have been proposed to explain rapid net size increases in some early Cenozoic mammalian lineages: sustained and gradual directional change, successive occupation of adaptive zones associated with progressively larger body sizes, and nondirectional evolution associated with branching events in combination with higher diversification potential of the larger lineages.*

We test these hypotheses in brontotheres, which are among the first radiations of mammals that consistently evolved multi-tonne sizes. Body-mass evolution in brontotheres mainly occurred during speciation and had no preferential direction.

Long-term directional change stemmed from the higher survival of larger lineages in less-saturated herbivore guilds. Our study emphasizes the role of differential species proliferation in explaining the long-term phenotypic trends observed in the fossil record, which are more than an accumulation of steady microevolutionary changes.

[Image shows brontothere *Megacerops kuwagatarhinus*.]

Cherney, M.D., et al. (2023) **Testosterone histories from tusks reveal woolly mammoth musth episodes.** NATURE 617:doi.org/10.1038/s41586-023-06020-9

Authors' abstract: *Hormones in biological media reveal endocrine activity related to development, reproduction, disease and stress on different timescales. Serum provides immediate circulating concentrations, whereas various tissues record steroid hormones accumulated over time.*

Hormones have been studied in keratin, bones and teeth in modern and ancient contexts; however, the biological significance of such records is subject to ongoing debate, and the utility of tooth-associated hormones has not previously been demonstrated.

Here we use liquid chromatography with tandem mass spectrometry paired with fine-scale serial sampling to measure steroid hormone concentrations in modern and fossil tusk dentin.

An adult male African elephant (Loxodonta africana) tusk shows periodic increases in testosterone that reveal episodes of musth, an annually recurring period of behavioural and physiological changes that enhance mating success.

Parallel assessments of a male woolly mammoth (Mammuthus primigenius) tusk show that mammoths also experienced musth. These results set the stage for wide-ranging studies using steroids preserved in dentin to investigate development, reproduction and stress in modern and extinct mammals.

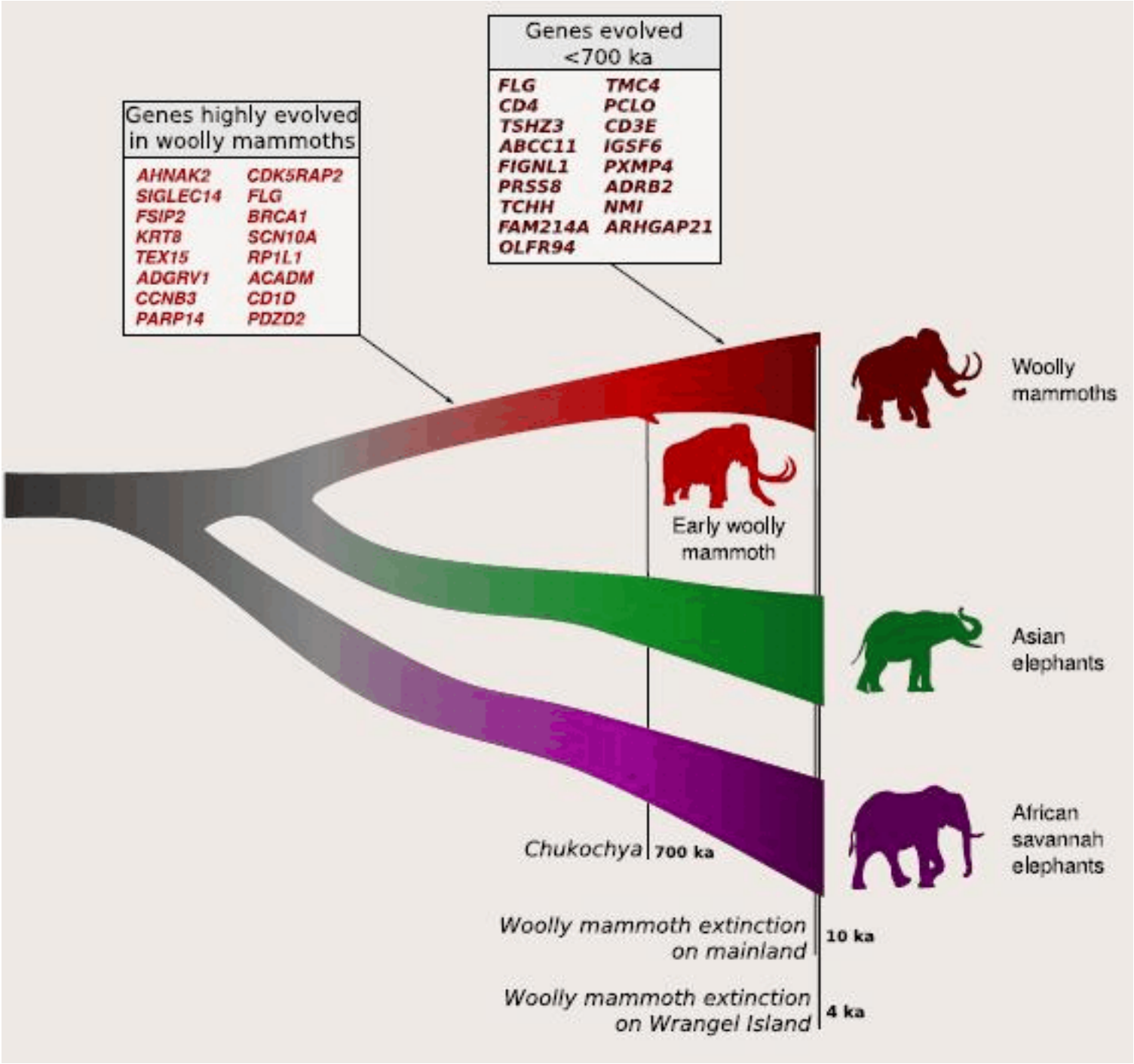
Because dentin grows by apposition, resists degradation, and often contains growth lines, teeth have advantages over other tissues that are used as records of endocrine data.

Diez-del-Molino, D., et al (2023) **Genomics of adaptive evolution in the woolly mammoth.** CURRENT BIOLOGY 33:doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2023.03.084 (available as a free pdf)

Authors' abstract: *Here, we analyze 23 woolly mammoth genomes, including one of the oldest known specimens at 700,000 years old, to identify fixed derived non-synonymous mutations unique to the species and to obtain estimates of when these mutations evolved.*

We find that at the time of its origin, the woolly mammoth had already acquired a broad spectrum of positively selected genes, including ones associated with hair and skin development, fat storage and metabolism, and immune system function.

Our results also suggest that these phenotypes continued to evolve during the last 700,000 years, but through positive selection on different sets of genes.



Finally, we also identify additional genes that underwent comparatively recent positive selection, including multiple genes related to skeletal morphology and body size, as well as one gene that may have contributed to the small ear size in Late Quaternary woolly mammoths.

[Chart is from this paper.]

Dinosaurs.

Zeitrag, C., et al (2023) **Gaze following in Archosauria: Alligators and palaeognath birds suggest dinosaur origin of visual perspective taking.** SCIENCE ADVANCES 9:doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.adf0405 (available as a free pdf)

Authors' abstract: *Taking someone else's visual perspective marks an evolutionary shift in the formation of advanced social cognition. It enables using others' attention to discover otherwise hidden aspects of the surroundings and is foundational for human communication and understanding of others.*

Visual perspective taking has also been found in some other primates, a few songbirds, and some canids. However, despite its essential role for social cognition, visual perspective taking has only been fragmentedly studied in animals, leaving its evolution and origins uncharted.

To begin to narrow this knowledge gap, we investigated extant archosaurs by comparing the neurocognitively least derived extant birds, palaeognaths, with the closest living relatives of birds, the crocodylians.

In a gaze following paradigm, we showed that palaeognaths engage in visual perspective taking and grasp the referentiality of gazes, while crocodylians do not. This suggests that visual perspective taking originated in early birds or non-avian dinosaurs, likely earlier than in mammals.

Zoology.

Aiello, B.R., et al (2023) **The origin of blinking in both mudskippers and tetrapods is linked to life on land.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 120:doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2220404120 (available as a free pdf)

Authors' abstract: *Blinking, the transient occlusion of the eye by one or more membranes, serves several functions including wetting, protecting, and cleaning the eye. This behavior is seen in nearly all living tetrapods and absent in other extant sarcopterygian lineages suggesting that it might have arisen during the water-to-land transition.*

Unfortunately, our understanding of the origin of blinking has been limited by a lack of known anatomical correlates of the behavior in the fossil record and a paucity of comparative functional studies.

To understand how and why blinking originates, we leverage mudskippers (Oxudercinae), a clade of amphibious fishes that have convergently evolved blinking.

Using microcomputed tomography and histology, we analyzed two mudskipper species, Periophthalmus barbarus and Periophthalmodon septemradiatus, and compared them to the fully aquatic round goby, Neogobius melanostomus.

Study of gross anatomy and epithelial microstructure shows that mudskippers have not evolved novel musculature or glands to blink. Behavioral analyses show the blinks of mudskippers are functionally convergent with those of tetrapods.

P. barbarus blinks more often under high-evaporation conditions to wet the eye, a blink reflex protects the eye from physical insult, and a single blink can fully clean the cornea of particulates.

Thus, eye retraction in concert with a passive occlusal membrane can achieve functions associated with life on land. Osteological correlates of eye retraction are present in the earliest limbed vertebrates, suggesting blinking capability.

In both mudskippers and tetrapods, therefore, the origin of this multifunctional innovation is likely explained by selection for increasingly terrestrial lifestyles.

Environmental Sciences.

Batchelor, C.L., et al (2023) **Rapid, buoyancy-driven ice-sheet retreat of hundreds of metres per day.** NATURE 617:doi.org/10.1038/s41586-023-05876-1

Authors' abstract: *Rates of ice-sheet grounding-line retreat can be quantified from the spacing of corrugation ridges on deglaciated regions of the seafloor, providing a long-term context for the approximately 50-year satellite record of ice-sheet change.*

However, the few existing examples of these landforms are restricted to small areas of the seafloor, limiting our understanding of future rates of grounding-line retreat and, hence, sea-level rise.

Here we use bathymetric data to map more than 7,600 corrugation ridges across 30,000 km of the mid-Norwegian shelf. The spacing of the ridges shows that pulses of rapid grounding-line retreat, at rates ranging from 55 to 610 metres per day, occurred across low-gradient (±1˚) ice-sheet beds during the last deglaciation.

These values far exceed all previously reported rates of grounding-line retreat across the satellite and marine-geological records. The highest retreat rates were measured across the flattest areas of the former bed, suggesting that near-instantaneous ice-sheet ungrounding and retreat can occur where the grounding line approaches full buoyancy.

Hydrostatic principles show that pulses of similarly rapid grounding-line retreat could occur across low-gradient Antarctic ice-sheet beds even under present-day climatic forcing. Ultimately, our results highlight the often-overlooked vulnerability of flat-bedded areas of ice sheets to pulses of extremely rapid, buoyancy-driven retreat.

Wolovick, M., et al (2023) **The potential for stabilizing Amundsen Sea glaciers via underwater curtains.** PNAS NEXUS 2:doi.org/10.1093/pnasnexus/pgad103 (available as a free pdf)

Authors' abstract: *Rapid sea level rise due to an ice sheet collapse has the potential to be extremely damaging the coastal communities and infrastructure. Blocking deep warm water with thin flexible buoyant underwater curtains may reduce melting of buttressing ice shelves and thereby slow the rate of sea level rise.*

Here, we use new multibeam bathymetric data sets, combined with a cost-benefit model, to evaluate potential curtain routes in the Amundsen Sea.

We organize potential curtain routes along a "difficulty ladder" representing an implementation pathway that might be followed as technological capabilities improve.

The first curtain blocks a single narrow (5 km) submarine choke point that represents the primary warm water inflow route towards western Thwaites Glacier, the most vulnerable part of the most vulnerable glacier in Antarctica.

Later curtains cross larger and deeper swaths of seabed, thus increasing their cost, while also protecting more of the ice sheet, increasing their benefit. In our simple cost-benefit analysis, all of the curtain routes achieve their peak value at target blocking depths between 500 and 550 metres.

The favorable cost-benefit ratios of these curtain routes, along with the trans-generational and societal equity of preserving the ice sheets near their present state, argue for increased research into buoyant curtains as a means of ice sheet preservation, including high-resolution fluid-structural and oceanographic modeling of deep water flow over and through the curtains, and coupled ice-ocean modeling of the dynamic response of the ice sheet.

Haram, L.E., et al (2023) **Extent and reproduction of coastal species on plastic debris in the North Pacific Subtropical Gyre.** NATURE ECOLOGY AND EVOLUTION 7:doi.org/10.1038/s41559-023-01997-y (available as a free pdf)

Authors' abstract: *We show that the high seas are colonized by a diverse array of coastal species, which survive and reproduce in the open ocean, contributing strongly to its floating community composition.*

Analysis of rafting plastic debris in the eastern North Pacific Subtropical Gyre revealed 37 coastal invertebrate taxa, largely of Western Pacific origin, exceeding pelagic taxa richness by threefold.

Coastal taxa, including diverse taxonomic groups and life history traits, occurred on 70.5% of debris items. Most coastal taxa possessed either direct development or asexual reproduction, possibly facilitating long-term persistence on rafts.

Our results suggest that the historical lack of available substrate limited the colonization of the open ocean by coastal species, rather than physiological or ecological constraints as previously assumed. It appears that coastal species persist now in the open ocean as a substantial component of a neopelagic community sustained by the vast and expanding sea of plastic debris.

Rafting, or the association of organisms with floating debris, has been an inferred mode of marine species dispersal since the nineteenth century. Yet empirical evidence of floating debris' role in long-term, transoceanic rafting of coastal marine species is limited.

The importance of coastal species dispersal by open-ocean rafting may depend largely on the nature of the raft material. Natural rafts consist of buoyant, floating vegetation or pumice (the buoyant rock formed during volcanic eruptions).

Natural materials are relatively short lived, decomposing at sea over a matter of months or a few years, becoming waterlogged and sinking, or being biodegraded or consumed by marine animals.

Anthropogenic materials also act as ocean rafts. Ephemeral anthropogenic materials, such as lumber, glass and metal, are made of naturally occurring materials and may not last at sea.

However, enduring plastic materials may survive much longer, although degradation rates vary across polymer type, habitat and environmental conditions.

Floating plastic materials, such as buoys and floats, built to persist in harsh marine environments, are by nature more durable and buoyant than natural materials, making floating plastics optimal rafts for long-distance and long-term dispersal.

Cordero, R.J.B., et al (2023) **The hypothermic nature of fungi.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 120:doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2221996120

Authors' abstract: *Mushrooms, the fruiting body of mycelium, were previously noticed to be colder than surrounding air through evaporative cooling. Here, we confirm those observations using infrared thermography and report that this hypothermic state is also observed in mold and yeast colonies.*

The relatively colder temperature of yeasts and molds is also mediated via evaporative cooling and associated with the accumulation of condensed water droplets on plate lids above colonies.

The colonies appear coldest at their center and the surrounding agar appears warmest near the colony edges. The analysis of cultivated Pleurotus ostreatus mushrooms revealed that the hypothermic feature of mushrooms can be observed throughout the whole fruiting process and at the level of mycelium. The mushroom's hymenium was coldest, and different areas of the mushroom appear to dissipate heat differently.

We also constructed a mushroom-based air-cooling prototype system capable of passively reducing the temperature of a semiclosed compartment by approximately 10˚C in 25 minutes.

These findings suggest that the fungal kingdom is characteristically cold. Since fungi make up approximately 2% of Earth's biomass, their evapotranspiration may contribute to cooler temperatures in local environments.

Kreling, S.E.S. (2023) **So overt it's covert: Wildlife coloration in the city.** BIOSCIENCE 73:doi.org/10.1093/biosci/biad021 (available as a free pdf)

Author's abstract: *Plumage and pelage coloration in birds and mammals has evolved as a balance between avoiding detection by predator or prey, sexual selection, and thermoregulation.*

However, with altered mutation rates, reduced predation risk, increased temperatures, strong genetic drift, and increased interaction with people, the evolutionary contexts in which these colorations arose are radically different from what is present in urban areas.

Regionally alternative color morphs or leucistic or melanistic individuals that aren't typical of most avian or mammalian populations may become more frequent as a result of adaptive or neutral evolution.

Therefore, I conceptualize that, in urban areas, conspicuous color morphologies may persist, leading to an increase in the frequency of regionally atypical pelage coloration.

In the present article, I discuss the potential for conspicuous color morphs to arise and persist in urban mammalian and avian populations, as well as the mechanisms for such persistence, as a result of altered environmental conditions and natural selection pressures.

Human Prehistory.

Zeller, E., et al (2023) **Human adaptation to diverse biomes over the past 3 million years.** SCIENCE 380:doi.org/10.1126/science.abq1288

Authors' abstract: *To investigate the role of vegetation and ecosystem diversity on hominin adaptation and migration, we identify past human habitat preferences over time using a transient 3-million-year earth system-biome model simulation and an extensive hominin fossil and archaeological database.*

Our analysis shows that early African hominins predominantly lived in open environments such as grassland and dry shrubland. Migrating into Eurasia, hominins adapted to a broader range of biomes over time.

By linking the location and age of hominin sites with corresponding simulated regional biomes, we also find that our ancestors actively selected for spatially diverse environments.

The quantitative results lead to a new diversity hypothesis: Homo species, in particular Homo sapiens, were specially equipped to adapt to landscape mosaics.

Essel, E., et al (2023) **Ancient human DNA recovered from a Palaeolithic pendant.** NATURE 617:doi.org/10.1038/s41586-023-06035-2 (available as a free pdf)

Authors' abstract: *Artefacts made from stones, bones and teeth are fundamental to our understanding of human subsistence strategies, behaviour and culture in the Pleistocene.*

Although these resources are plentiful, it is impossible to associate artefacts to specific human individuals who can be morphologically or genetically characterized, unless they are found within burials, which are rare in this time period.

Thus, our ability to discern the societal roles of Pleistocene individuals based on their biological sex or genetic ancestry is limited. Here we report the development of a non-destructive method for the gradual release of DNA trapped in ancient bone and tooth artefacts.

Application of the method to an Upper Palaeolithic deer tooth pendant from Denisova Cave, Russia, resulted in the recovery of ancient human and deer mitochondrial genomes, which allowed us to estimate the age of the pendant at approximately 19,000 to 25,000 years.

Nuclear DNA analysis identifies the presumed maker or wearer of the pendant as a female individual with strong genetic affinities to a group of Ancient North Eurasian individuals who lived around the same time but were previously found only further east in Siberia.

Palaeolithic assemblages typically contain a multitude of objects that may differ in age by hundreds or thousands of years, even when found in close proximity. Thus, it can be challenging to associate human remains with specific objects.

Recent advances in the retrieval of human DNA from sediments can be used to connect artefacts with genetic populations.

However, precise identification of the specific makers or users of these objects would require the recovery of human DNA directly from the objects themselves, analogous to modern-day forensic investigations.

In theory, such analyses are most promising for artefacts made from animal bones or teeth, not only because they are porous and thereby conducive to the penetration of body fluids (for example, sweat, blood or saliva) but also because they contain hydroxyapatite, which is known to adsorb DNA and reduce its degradation by hydrolysis and nuclease activity.

Ancient bones and teeth may therefore function as a trap not only for DNA that is released within an organism during its lifetime and subsequent decomposition but also for exogenous DNA that enters the matrix post-mortem through microbial colonization or handling by humans.

Crassard, R., et al (2023) **The oldest plans to scale of humanmade megastructures.** PLOS ONE 18:doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0277927 (available as a free pdf)

[Desert kites are ancient wildlife impoundments, funnel-shaped one-way traps into which humans herded animals for slaughter. They can only be visualized from the air and are so-called because the traps are kite shaped.]

Authors' abstract: *Data on how Stone Age communities conceived domestic and utilitarian structures are limited to a few examples of schematic and non-accurate representations of various-sized built spaces.*

Here, we report the exceptional discovery of the up-to-now oldest realistic plans that have been engraved on stones. These engravings from Jordan and Saudi Arabia depict 'desert kites', humanmade archaeological mega-traps that are dated to at least 9,000 years ago for the oldest.

The extreme precision of these engravings is remarkable, representing gigantic neighboring Neolithic stone structures, the whole design of which is impossible to grasp without seeing it from the air or without being their architect (or user, or builder).

They reveal a widely underestimated mental mastery of space perception, hitherto never observed at this level of accuracy in such an early context. These representations shed new light on the evolution of human discernment of space, communication, and communal activities in ancient times.

Modern Humans.

Nishizono, R., et al (2023) **Highly reproducible eyeblink timing during formula car driving,** iSCIENCE 26:doi.org/10.1016/j.isci.2023.106803 (available as a free pdf)

Authors' abstract: *How do humans blink while driving a vehicle? Although gaze control patterns have been previously reported in relation to successful steering, eyeblinks that disrupt vision are believed to be randomly distributed during driving or are ignored.*

Herein, we demonstrate that eyeblink timing shows reproducible patterns during real formula car racing driving and is related to car control.

We studied three top-level racing drivers. Their eyeblinks and driving behavior were acquired during practice sessions. The results revealed that the drivers blinked at surprisingly similar positions on the courses.

We identified three factors underlying the eyeblink patterns: the driver's individual blink count, lap pace associated with how strictly they followed their pattern on each lap, and car acceleration associated with when/where to blink at amoment.

These findings suggest that the eyeblink pattern reflected cognitive states during in-the-wild driving and experts appear to change such cognitive states continuously and dynamically.

Wang, A., et al (2023) **High fried food consumption impacts anxiety and depression due to lipid metabolism disturbance and neuroinflammation.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 120:doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2221097120

Authors' abstract: *Western dietary patterns have been unfavorably linked with mental health. However, the long-term effects of habitual fried food consumption on anxiety and depression and underlying mechanisms remain unclear.*

Our population-based study with 140,728 people revealed that frequent fried food consumption, especially fried potato consumption, is strongly associated with 12% and 7% higher risk of anxiety and depression, respectively. The associations were more pronounced among male and younger consumers.

Consistently, long-term exposure to acrylamide, a representative food processing contaminant in fried products, exacerbates scototaxis and thigmotaxis, and further impairs exploration ability and sociality of adult zebrafish, showing anxiety- and depressive-like behaviors.

Moreover, treatment with acrylamide significantly down-regulates the gene expression of tjp2a related to the permeability of blood-brain barrier.

Multiomics analysis showed that chronic exposure to acrylamide induces cerebral lipid metabolism disturbance and neuroinflammation. PPAR signaling pathway mediates acrylamide-induced lipid metabolism disorder in the brain of zebrafish.

Especially, chronic exposure to acrylamide dysregulates sphingolipid and phospholipid metabolism, which plays important roles in the development of anxiety and depression symptoms.

In addition, acrylamide promotes lipid peroxidation and oxidation stress, which participate in cerebral neuroinflammation.

Acrylamide dramatically increases the markers of lipid peroxidation, including (±)5-HETE, 11(S)-HETE, 5-oxoETE, and up-regulates the expression of proinflammatory lipid mediators such as (±)12-HETE and 14(S)-HDHA, indicating elevated cerebral inflammatory status after chronic exposure to acrylamide.

Together, these results both epidemiologically and mechanistically provide strong evidence to unravel the mechanism of acrylamide-triggered anxiety and depression, and highlight the significance of reducing fried food consumption for mental health.

Marie, A., et al (2023) **Moralization and extremism robustly amplify myside sharing.** PNAS NEXUS 2:doi.org/10.1093/pnasnexus/pgad078 (available as a free pdf)

Authors' abstract: *Polarization between liberals and conservatives is partly anchored in disagreements about facts. Across 12 experiments (N = 6,989), we document one source of this polarization of belief by showing that people's moralization of an issue and attitude extremity exaggerate the selective sharing of partisan news on social media.*

Those effects were observed on both true and fake news (i.e. fabricated claims). Manipulations of the imagined political composition of the audience and account anonymity, as well as intervention messages highlighting our propensity to process and share partisan information in self-serving ways, had little effect on sharing intentions.

We explored whether moralization and attitude extremity may amplify a preference to share politically congruent ("myside") partisan news and what types of targeted interventions may reduce this tendency.

Across 12 online experiments (N = 6,989), we examined decisions to share news touching on the divisive issues of gun control, abortion, gender and racial equality, and immigration.

Myside sharing was systematically observed and was consistently amplified when participants (i) moralized and (ii) were attitudinally extreme on the issue. The amplification of myside sharing by moralization also frequently occurred above and beyond that of attitude extremity.

These effects generalized to both true and fake partisan news. We then examined a number of interventions meant to curb myside sharing by manipulating

(i) the audience to which people imagined sharing partisan news (political friends vs. foes),
(ii) the anonymity of the account used (anonymous vs. personal),
(iii) a message warning against the myside bias, and (iv) a message warning against the reputational costs of sharing "mysided" fake news coupled with an interactive rating task.

While some of those manipulations slightly decreased sharing in general and/or the size of myside sharing, the amplification of myside sharing by moral attitudes was consistently robust to these interventions.

Our findings regarding the robust exaggeration of selective communication by morality and extremism offer important insights into belief polarization and the spread of partisan and false information online.

Lees, J., et al (2023) **The Spot the Troll Quiz game increases accuracy in discerning between real and inauthentic social media accounts.** PNAS NEXUS 2:doi.org/10.1093/pnasnexus/pgad094 (available as a free pdf)

Authors' abstract: *The proliferation of political mis/disinformation on social media has led many scholars to embrace "inoculation" techniques, where individuals are trained to identify the signs of low-veracity information prior to exposure.*

Coordinated information operations frequently spread mis/disinformation through inauthentic or "troll" accounts that appear to be trustworthy members to the targeted polity, as in Russia's attempts to influence the 2016 US presidential election.

We experimentally tested the efficacy of inoculation against inauthentic online actors, using the Spot the Troll Quiz, a free, online educational tool that teaches how to spot markers of inauthenticity. Inoculation works in this setting.

Across an online US nationally representative sample (N = 2,847), which also oversampled older adults, we find that taking the Spot the Troll Quiz (vs. playing a simple game) significantly increases participants' accuracy in identifying trolls among a set of Twitter accounts that are novel to participants.

This inoculation also reduces participants' self-efficacy in identifying inauthentic accounts and reduced the perceived reliability of fake news headlines, although it had no effect on affective polarization.

And while accuracy in the novel troll-spotting task is negatively associated with age and Republican party identification, the Quiz is equally effective on older adults and Republicans as it was on younger adults and Democrats.

In the field, a convenience set of Twitter users who posted their Spot the Troll Quiz results in the fall of 2020 (N = 505) reduced their rate of retweeting in the period after the Quiz, with no impact on original tweeting.

Building on previous inoculation interventions, our project examines the influence of the Spot the Troll Quiz. The Quiz is a gamified inoculation intervention.

Unlike previous interventions, the Spot the Troll Quiz is aimed at teaching individuals to identify fake online profiles created by real-world actors, instead of fake content or fake accounts created by researchers.

It teaches individuals to spot tactics commonly used in deception and persuasion, in general, and online inauthenticity such as phishing and disinformation specifically, including

the presence of extreme and hyperbolic content;
the use of young, attractive, and often female profile images; spreading of hoax events;
the conspicuous lack of personal information; claiming identification with affinity groups with no identifiable members;
and exclusive focus on prominent individuals and national news.

The Quiz's focus on general tactics of deception, taught with clear examples of accounts created by the Russian Internet Agency juxtaposed to the behavior of authentic users, allows Quiz takers to generalize what they learn beyond the narrow context of the 2016 Russian disinformation campaigns.

[Spot The Troll is available at https://spotthetroll.org Let me know how it works for you.]

SEEN AT CITY HALL
photo by Dale Speirs

One would think that these days the oilmen would keep a low profile, but they know a bandwagon when they see one. I spotted this in the Calgary Municipal Building.