

OPUNTIA 566

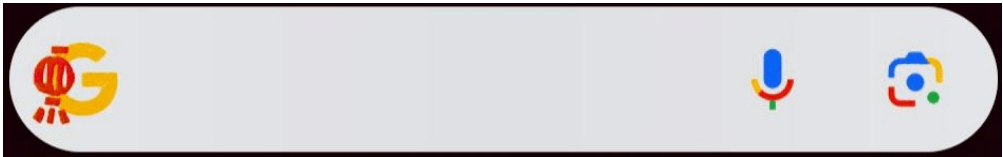


Lunar New Year 2024

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.

ENTER THE DRAGON
photos by Dale Speirs

2024-02-10



2024 is the Year of the Dragon in the Chinese calendar. Cowtowners love a party and the Lunar New Year celebrations are always big in Calgary. This year we had mild weather at -5°C and no snow during the festivities.

The dragon and lion dances were therefore held outside the Calgary Chinese Cultural Centre on Daqing Avenue, named after Calgary’s sister city in China. The avenue begins at the front steps of the Cultural Centre. The cover photo shows the opening ceremonies with all the lion and dragon dancers bowing to the dignitaries.





Above: As the Master of Ceremonies told us, the Calgary dragon dancers club added a second dragon to their group, a smaller version for children 6 to 13 years old.



CHINOOK BLAST: PART 2
photos by Dale Speirs

In the last issue were photos of Calgary’s winter festival taken downtown on the night of Friday, February 2, at Olympic Plaza and Stephen Avenue Mall. The festival ran until February 19.

It seems to be a truism that event websites are clunky and require constant tabbing. The Calgary Stampede used to distribute a booklet each year listing all the events each day on a single page. After the pandemic they went to a website requiring tabbing back and forth for each event. The Chinook Blast website was the same way, so I missed some of the displays because they were hidden under some non-obvious tab.

Sunday, February 4, the city had about 10 cm of snow. Monday I was downtown on errands and discovered purely by chance there was a display on the City Hall Plaza across the street from the Olympic Plaza. The electronic screens were a 360° animation with random art.

However, the display was running during the day so I took some photos as shown here. A contractor was clearing snow off the plaza with a skid-steer machine, while labourers shoveled the steps.





CRIME AND PUBLISHMENT: PART 8

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 7 appeared in OPUNTIA's #61.1, 391, 422, 471, 494, 527, and 548.]

Writing Success Stories, Or Not.

THE GRUB STREET NIGHTS ENTERTAINMENTS (1924) by J.C. Squire was a collection of nine of his stories of the literary life. Squire is perhaps better known as the editor of the alternative history anthology IF IT HAD HAPPENED OTHERWISE (1931). Wikipedia credits him as the author of the line “*I am not so thick as you drunk I am*”.

Leading off this collection was “The Man Who Kept A Diary”, about a nebbish Londoner named William Wigglesworth and his ambitious niece Mary. He had a small inheritance which enabled him to live a quiet life puttering about doing very little.

Mary had greater plans for him but he kept fobbing her off. He told her one day that he was keeping a diary, the kind that is eventually published. She blabbed that across the snobbish class. They began inviting him to great social events in the hopes of being mentioned in his diary some day.

William became a busy man for the remainder of his days, eating for free every night in the stately homes of fawning socialites. When he passed on, his executors hastened to read his diaries, only to discover he never kept any.

“The Bestseller” was about John and Edith Bentley, a middle-class couple by virtue of his hard work in the motor trade. She was meek and mousy but had dreams. He dominated their marriage, not unkindly, but didn’t really understand her.

Edith wrote a novel and timidly submitted the manuscript to a publisher. After a few months, the book was accepted and published. Sales were slow at first but soon soared and made the book a bestseller.

John was flummoxed. Her royalty cheques were bigger than his shop’s profits. He found himself as the subordinate in their relationship. She was too happy and busy to notice, a reversal of roles.

“The Success” wasn’t. A tedious story about a failed novelist Ambrose Hilton dumped by his publisher. There followed a series of wild coincidences, as Hilton met one of his two fans, then learned of the death of his long-lost love.

“Baxteriana” was about Eustace Hawke, a bibliophile whose hobby was the reading and study of the works of William Baxter. There was a small study group devoted to this long-dead author, who hunted down obscure facts about his life and analyzed his stories endlessly. Like Lovecraft or Howard, actually.

Hawke learned of the discovery of some Baxter letters which revealed a disgusting side of the great man. The thought that such might exist drove him to buy the letters at a great price for suppression.

The letters were burned in Hawke’s fireplace. But the knowledge that they had existed and what was in them destroyed Hawke’s interest in Baxter. His idol not only had feet of clay but they were smeared with manure.

“The Lecture” was about Alfred Winter, a public speaker who earned his living touring the lecture halls. His most frequent topic was “The Primary Functions Of Art”. The life weighed down on him and one night he gave in to temptation.

He gave the speech he always wanted to give. The audience were too lazy to read a book, so they wanted someone to spoon-feed it to them verbally, he told them. The dignitaries on the dais were pompous twits. The evening ended in a riot, for few people appreciate being exposed as they actually are.

There’s no such thing as bad publicity, as Winter learned. His bookings increased and so did his prices, although he was careful not to be as controversial anymore.

“The Cemetery” was about Lionel Crewe, a failed poet and novelist. He was reduced to working for a newspaper, in charge of writing obituaries for famous people.

As is the practice even today among the news media, obituaries of public persons are prepared in advance. People die at inconvenient times, so an obituary already on file makes it easier to rush into print or onto the air.

Crewe’s job was to update existing obituaries at intervals and write new ones as required. He found his own obituary, written by someone who didn’t want

to be offensive about such a poor talent. The couched terms and euphemisms were insulting to Crewe.

When he thought about his life though, he realized there was only one way to write his obituary, in plain English stating that he had been a failure. So he did, and put the result on file.

Later he died suddenly in his cheap room. A busy editor ran the obituary without reading it first. A few acquaintances of Crewe thought the obituary was rude and started an outcry. That led to the formation of a Crewe Society to get his works back into print. In death, he was read by thousands, as he never was in life.

“The Painful Dilemma” carried on the theme of this anthology, the lives of literary losers. This time a critic John Fulford took pity on a dying author whose books never earned back their costs.

Out of sympathy, Fulford praised the latest book, a typically dull novel, which then became a bestseller. The author revived, ready for another go around. Meanwhile Fulford had diminished his reputation and was faced with the prospect of the next novel.

The final story was “The Man Who Wrote Free Verse”, about two young men-about-town staging a hoax. Under an assumed name, they wrote and successfully passed off gibberish as free verse and concrete poetry.

Thus far the story parodied the real world of poetry. Events then swerved into alternative history when the poetry inspired a Bolshevik revolution in England. Once again the country became a republic, and the lumpenproletariat rejoiced in bad free verse.

Cozy Writing.

ON SPINE OF DEATH (2022) by Tamara Berry was a novel in a cozy series about Tess Harrow and her teenage daughter Gertrude of Winthrop, Washington State. Tess was a published author but at the moment was converting the family hardware store she inherited into a bookstore.

During renovations, human bones were discovered. Tess’s grandfather was implicated as a serial killer, so the Marpleing began. She figured that since she wrote mystery novels, she might as well use the case as a roman a clef.

“Fury Under The Floorboards” she called it, writing the plot as the Deppity Dawgs tore the building apart looking for more bodies.

Horror writer Peter Oblonsky arrived in town. He told Tess about local author Simone Peaky, whom no one had ever seen. Peaky had written a novel about skeletons discovered under floorboards in a village called Heythrop.

Examination of the text in light of recent events suggested that Peaky had written a confessional from personal experience. What upset Tess even more was that now she had to go back and change her manuscript to avoid accusations she was a plagiarist.

There followed the usual confrontation with the murderer, whom Tess identified after realizing Simone Peaky was an anagram for the murderer’s real name. The killer had severe psychological problems she took out on other women, including Tess.

After the alarums concluded and the murderer taken away, Tess was left contemplating the behind-schedule renovations. No doubt the bookstore would be opened during the next novel and murder.

WED, READ, AND DEAD (2019) by V.M. Burns was a novel in a cozy series about Samantha Washington of North Harbor, Michigan. She operated a bookstore when not Marpleing on the blood-soaked beaches of Michigan.

Her mother Grace was re-marrying, this time a wealthy man named Harold Robertson. The wedding planner was Lydia Lighthouse, a micromanager hated by all who met her. Not surprisingly she was murdered. There was satisfaction among the populace that someone had rid them of this troublesome woman.

Samantha wrote historical novels on the side, using current events in her life for the plots. Her series was about Lady Elizabeth Marsh, of the English aristocracy just before World War Two. As alarums occurred in modern-day North Harbor, the text alternated with Lady Marsh in a country manor in 1938.

Events revealed that Lydia had been a blackmailer who finally pushed her victim too far. The killer was caught and all ended well in both North Harbor and the novel.

BOOKMARKED FOR MURDER (2019) was the next installment in the series. Samantha Washington and friends had gone to Chicago for after-Christmas bargain shopping. There and back by bus.

As with many cozy series, when the death toll in a village reaches a certain point, the author becomes embarrassed and sends Miss Marple or Jessica Fletcher touring to spread the murders around.

In this case, the bus return trip only got as far as an Indiana rest stop, and Chapter 1, before Max Franck was murdered in his bus seat. Samantha was unperturbed and immediately began writing another Lady Marsh novel. That murder was placed in a London tube station.

The plot followed real life. The text alternated between the Great Lakes and pre-war London. Franck had been a writer about to reveal a murderer, who struck first. Lady Marsh also solved her crime. I thought her part of the book read better.

Old-Time Radio Writing.

THE HAUNTING HOUR was a 30-minute show whose title referred to the midnight hour, not the airplay length. No credits were ever given to cast or writers. Available as free downloads from the Old Time Radio Researchers at www.otrr.org/OTRRLibrary

“The Perfect Crime” aired in 1945. Robert Lane was a mystery author whose current story in his typewriter was the opening narration.

Jeff was holding a silenced handgun on a rival suitor Matt for the hand of Myra. Jeff explained at great length how he was going shoot Matt and then put the gun in his hand to make it look like suicide.

Then a jump from the pages into Lane’s world. A police detective friend named McGinnis entered. Lane bragged to him that this would be one of the finest mysteries ever written, the story of a perfect crime.

Trouble was, it couldn’t be published because the plot would serve as a blueprint for real criminals. Lane and McGinnis debated the issue for a while. Then the latter held out a copy of one of Lane’s stories and asked for an autograph.

As Lane did so, McGinnis commented on Lane’s lefthandedness. A rather blatant telegraphing of a clue for what would happen later on.

Jumping ahead, McGinnis had left and Lane was on the telephone with Marge. The real version of Myra, not the one in his story. They chatted about Jewitt, his competitor for her affections. He took Marge out to dinner, leaving his story about the perfect crime on his desk.

Returning home later that evening by himself, Lane found Jewitt waiting for him. With a gun, and plenty of time to have read the story. Jewitt then burned the manuscript. He appreciated Lane having done the work in planning a perfect crime. The deed was done.

McGinnis solved the case in the last two minutes of the episode. Firstly, Jewitt didn’t know Lane was lefthanded and put the gun in his right hand. Secondly, Jewitt wiped his fingerprints off the gun but forgot that the bullet cartridges had his fingerprints.

Publishing.

THE MYSTERY OF HENRI PICK (2016) by David Foenkinos (translation from the French by Sam Taylor, 2020) was set in the French town of Crozon. The library had a specialized collection of manuscripts rejected by publishers.

One manuscript came with 400 rejection slips. Other unwanted texts included “Growing Flowers By Candlelight In Hotel Rooms” and a cookbook that compiled every meal eaten in Dostoevsky’s novels.

The plot began rolling when an out-of-town editor visited the library. She chose a manuscript by a deceased Crozon pizza chef Henri Pick. The book became a bestseller but allegations arose that it was a hoax.

The book was a media sensation because of its context, not its text. The widow Pick declined publicity but her daughter capitalized on the book to boost sales at her lingerie shop. *“People queued up to buy a bra from the daughter of the pizzeria owner wh’d written a novel in absolute secrecy.”*

There were several twists and complicated back stories. No murders, no crimes, just a book that would or would not stand on its own merits. Who could say?

SCIENCE FICTION ANTHOLOGIES AND COLLECTIONS
by Dale Speirs

An anthology is a group of stories by different authors. A collection is a group of stories all by the same author. If I seem pedantic about this, it is because I have seen the terms mis-used.

CLASSIC TALES OF SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY (2016), no editor cited, was a compendium of public domain stories in a 1,000 page doorstop hardcover. I won't review any of the stories but list the table of contents below. The book is a good introduction to the classics of yore, the kind that should be taught more often in high schools.

- The Diamond Lens (1858) by Fitz James O'Brien
- A Journey To The Centre Of The Earth (1864) by Jules Verne
- Looking Backward: 2000-1887 (1888) by Edward Bellamy
- The War Of The Worlds (1897) by H.G. Wells
- A Princess Of Mars (1912) by Edgar Rice Burroughs
- The Lost World (1912) by Arthur Conan Doyle
- The Scarlet Plague (1915) by Jack London
- Herland (1915) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman
- Armageddon 2419 AD (1928) by Philip Francis Nowlan
- The Dunwich Horror (1928) by H.P. Lovecraft

SHAPERS OF WORLDS: Volume 1 (2020) was an anthology of 18 stories, edited by Edward Willett. I won't review all the stories, just a few, and some will be mentioned in thematic columns. The stories ran the gamut from fantasy to military SF, and included some older stories. Very few stories I skipped through; most were quite readable.

“The Tale Of The Wicked” (2009) by John Scalzi considered what would happen if military spaceships had AI systems who didn't want to fight. Peace in our time.

“The Farships Fall To Nowhere” (2020) by John C. Wright looked at the problem of generation starships. The crews evolved to adapt to spacecraft life, which meant they couldn't survive landings on the destination planets.

“Evanescence” (2020) by L.E. Modesitt Jr began when the Solar System was just a rotating disk of dust and gases. An alien race did some nudging to produce

order and planets out of chaos. Jumping forward a few billion years, an Earthling in a scout ship came across a leftover relic and tried to communicate. Only broadcasting European opera at the relic succeeded in waking it. Yeah, sure, was my thought.

“Welcome To The Legion Of Six” (2019) by Fonda Lee was a humourous look at one problem faced by leagues of superheroes, that of succession planning. The story was about a group of aging superheroes conducting job interviews to fill a vacancy. So true to life, it's funny.

SHAPERS OF WORLDS: Volume 2 was published in 2021. This time it was a slightly thicker volume of 14 stories, once more edited by Edward Willett.

Again, just picking a few stories, I start with “Letters From An Imprisoned Wizard To A Young Queen, And Associated Explicatory Correspondence” (2021) by Garth Nix. This was the attempt by an imprisoned wizard to send letters to his Queen, appealing for his release.

Unfortunately the letters were slipping through a crack in time and being delivered to a queen centuries hence. She was baffled because records of the wizard had long been lost, and her bureaucrats could not find anything about him. Eventually she managed to send a pardon back in time, although the wizard never understood the problem.

“The Cat And The Merrythought” (2021) by Matthew Hughes was a magic fantasy about two men, one of whom had been gifted with a cornucopia for services rendered. It provided a steady supply of jewels and bullion coins.

One of those coins was revealed to be the nexus for an ancient magician. Evil had been done in days of yore, and a fair maiden turned into a cat to protect her against the avaricious grasp of a mage. The presence of that coin undid the effect and set up a final struggle.

SHAPERS OF WORLDS Volume 3 (2022) was edited by Edward Willett and featured 21 stories. Most were original to this anthology but a few were older works. I'll mention a couple of stories here and some in other themed reviews.

Leading off was “And The Walls Came Tumbling Down” by James Morrow. The story was about Yasha ben Ephod, the shofar musician for Joshua who blew down the walls of Jericho.

An angel then brought Yasha forward to Berlin in 1989 to take down their wall, but that plan didn't work. From there to the Rio Grande wall along the American-Mexican border, where Yasha blew down the wall but not with the results expected. An interesting sequel to the Book of Joshua.

“Thresholds” by Kristi Charish was an inevitable byproduct of COVID-19, set in a future where one pandemic disease after another kept rolling through. CDC officers parachuted in to potential outbreaks, constantly trying to keep up with all the mutations of all the diseases. They carried sidearms for good reason.

SHOGGOTHS IN TRAFFIC (2021) was a collection of 23 stories by Tobias S. Buckell. I won't review all of them but mention a couple below and others in different thematic review columns.

The first story was “A Different Kind Of Place” which was about a zombie virus and the reaction of small-town dwellers to the idea of mass vaccination.

Yes, exactly a COVID-19 story with only the name of the virus changed. Had it been filmed as a television movie in early 2020, it might have made a lot of anti-vaxxers very uncomfortable and possibly convinced more of them to get the needle.

Buckell tried some logical extrapolations of fairy tales would really end. “The Emperor And His Totally Amazing, Awesome Clothes” came out differently. The Emperor ordered his secret police to ensure that his new clothes were in fact admired by all. Or else.

PATHS TO THE STARS (2018) was a collection of 22 stories written by Edward Willett. I'll mention a few stories I liked, a couple of them here and some sorted out into my thematic reviews.

“Memory Jam” was about a spinster who made the most wonderful jams. Everyone agreed. The local inhabitants came and went while she stayed forever. No one made the connection between the occasional missing child, her jams, and her unchanging appearance.

She made special jams from the essences of each child and used them to stay as she was. When puberty hit, she had to fertilize her garden with the child and get a new one.

“Waterlilies” was a nanotechnology grey-goo story, the kind that will eventually come true because there are more idiots than savants in this world. An artist tried to use nanomites to create self-replicating paintings.

He didn't bother reading all that boring documentation, as a result of which the inevitable happened. Soon the world would be covered with replicas of Monet's water lily paintings.

PHILATELIC FICTION: PART 6

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 5 appeared in OPUNTIA #417, 479, 498, 522, and 542.]

Postal History.

THE BURNS AND ALLEN SHOW was an old-time radio comedy series. Episodes are available from the Old Time Radio Researchers website as free downloads. Visit www.otrr.org/OTRRLibrary

George Burns and his wife Gracie Allen began in vaudeville, he as a standup comedian and she and her three sisters as Irish step dancers. They married and were in old-time radio from the 1930s to the 1950s. George became the straight man and Gracie played what was known as a Dumb Dora.

“Mailing A Christmas Package” aired on 1941-12-16, a week after the Pearl Harbor attack. The show was sponsored by Swan Soap. The opening sequences were random incidents unrelated to the main plot.

The announcer Bill Goodwin and tenor Jimmy Cash dropped by. Goodwin mentioned he was on his way to the post office. Gracie said she had a Christmas gift to mail, a package of rocks for a friend who had a rock garden.

After a song by Cash, entirely forgettable, the scene jumped to the post office, where George and Gracie were waiting to mail the heavy package. The Christmas rush was on, so the queue was very long.

George carried the package, unaware of its contents. He complained about its weight and said it weighed like a bunch of rocks. He didn't like the lineups but Gracie told him not to complain, saying "*If it wasn't for the Post Office, we wouldn't get half our mail*".

Another line opened but when George and Gracie rushed over, they were told the wicket was only for money orders. George tried to resume his position in the previous lineup but had to go back to the end of the line.

Gracie went off to complain to the supervisor. On the way she bumped into a customer and knocked his parcels onto the floor. He was the one who apologized, saying he shouldn't be there at that time of year. This incident was to set up a running gag in the episode.

George was now second in line but Gracie called him over. She told him that when he got to the window he was to ask the clerk where the superintendent's office was. When he tried to get back in line, the queuers refused to let him back and he had to go to the end.

Gracie then bumped into the same man again and knocked his parcels to the floor. He said it didn't really matter as his relatives hated him anyway. From there, she got into an argument with a clerk selling war stamps.

Just as George reached the front of the line, Goodwin came in and offered to hold the package. He then wandered off to tout Swan Soap to a passerby. George had to leave the window to retrieve the package. Once more he had to stand at the rear of the line.

Gracie found the superintendent but antagonized him by her blithering. An orchestral number followed as a segue to a scene change to the Burns residence. Goodwin mentioned the package had finally been mailed, costing George \$11 and 15 years of his life. (About \$110 in today's depreciated currency.)

Ethel Wilcox, who lived across the street, brought over a Christmas present. Gracie told her that she and George had just mailed her gift, an addition for her rock garden.

MONK was a television series which aired from 2002 until 2009. Adrian Monk was a private detective who consulted for the San Francisco Police Department because of his ability to connect apparently unrelated clues and cases. He was, however, a psychological basket case who was an obsessive compulsive germophobe and had to be tended by his nurse Sharona Fleming.

"Mr Monk And The Sleeping Suspect" aired on 2003-08-08. In the opening teaser, SFPD detectives Stottlemeyer and Disher were on the street taking down a suspect.

A car driven by a man later identified as Brian Babbage deliberately scraped the police car, then spun its tires. Just as the detectives jumped in their car to give chase, Brian ran a red light at the next intersection and was T-boned. He wound up in hospital in a coma and was still there.

He was one of three wealthy siblings squabbling over their inheritance, suing each other over their father's immense estate. His sister received a package which had been forwarded from her old address of a couple of months before. It was a mail bomb, which killed her when she opened it.

Her other brother Ricky was a suspect but Monk didn't believe he made the bomb. Firstly, Ricky knew his sister had moved and had been to her new house recently for a barbecue, so he would not have mis-addressed the mail bomb.

Secondly, the bomb had been tied with string in an elaborate and elegant knot. Monk noticed Ricky had tied a surfboard on his SUV with a messy, poorly-done knot. Eventually Ricky received a package similar to his sister, but Monk and Sharona were with him and saved him from opening it.

Monk became convinced that Brian had sent the mail bombs, notwithstanding that he had been comatose for four months. The mail bombs had postmarks from only a few days before they were received. Using apparently unconnected clues, Monk figured out Brian's method.

Brian had glued the mail bombs, properly stamped with postage, inside the street letter boxes up near the top where mail couriers wouldn't see them when they cleared the boxes. Eventually the glue dried, the parcel fell down to the bottom, and was cleared by the mail pickup man, thereafter being delivered in the normal way.

Brian had not intended to put himself into a coma with a staged accident. The collision was real and unscripted. Rather, his intent was to be arrested and get himself sentenced to six months in prison, during which term the mail bombs would be delivered. As Stottlemeyer noted, Brian had given himself the most perfect alibi in the world.

One of the packages was addressed to Brian to make it look like he was a victim as well. His idea was that it would further prove he didn't send the bombs, when his secretary opened it and was killed. Monk and the police intercepted the bomb before it exploded, saving the secretary's life.

Through an inadvertence, Brian woke up from his coma. Monk and the police hid nearby as the secretary, playing innocent, delivered to Brian his accumulated mail. The wrappings from the bomb were placed on a dummy package.

When she made as to open it at his bedside, he hysterically dived from his hospital bed screaming to her not to open it because it was a bomb. The rest was details.

Posties.

Sherlock Holmes was very successful on radio. He aired on several networks with several sets of actors from 1930 to 1956, encompassing the entire lifespan of old-time radio. Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce had a long run, but others played the parts before and after. Available as free downloads from the Old Time Radio Researchers at www.otrr.org/OTRRLibrary

“The Tolling Bell” aired on 1947-04-07, no writer credited. Holmes and Watson had just completed a case and were relaxing in a country hotel. At breakfast they heard a bell tolling from the village church.

The landlady told them the bell was for a double funeral. A jealous husband killed his wife, then himself. Meanwhile the hotel chambermaid Mary was mournful because she hadn't heard from her man Tom, who had gone to seek his fortune in the city.

The lettercarrier Gillies brought Holmes a couple of letters and a substantial amount of village gossip. He mentioned that he also rang the church bells as a side job. Later Tom's mother asked Holmes to investigate.

The next morning the bells were heard again. A shopkeeper had committed suicide because he hadn't heard from his son in Australia. Holmes found himself investigating, and deduced that Gillies was playing God by withholding letters.

To prove the case, and knowing Gillies was reading the letters, Holmes arranged for Mary to stage a fake suicide. The only way Gillies could have found out was by intercepting her mail. Once more the funeral bell tolled. Holmes and Watson confronted Gillies in the bell tower.

Gillies bwah-ha!-ha!-ed about how reading and intercepting letters made him feel like a god and, in some matters, gain revenge for wrongs he felt had been done him. Some of the incidents were more imagined than real.

Holmes tried to collar Gillie but he scampered up the ladder into the belfry. Holmes then began ringing the bell, which made Gillie scream from the deafening sound up there. He jumped from the tower and justice was served outside the courtroom.

“The Dead Letter Office” by David Erik Nelson (2023 Sep/Oct, ASIMOV”S) began with a conversation between two USPS workers about children's Santa Claus letters. Posties were instructed to ship the letters to a central office where they would be burned unopened.

From there, the story made a right-angle turn about sexual predators working in postal sorting plants. Things got ugly, really ugly. Not a happy ending.

2027 WORLDCON BID BY MONTREAL

This just in. Terry Fong and Rebecca Downey have announced they are bidding for a Worldcon to be held in Montreal in 2027. The venue would be the Palais des Congres. Few details are available this early but they have a pre-support website at bid.montreal2027.ca

Montreal last hosted a Worldcon in 2009 and the World Fantasy Convention in 2021. The local fans had numerous local conventions over the years as well.

LITERA SCRIPTA MANET AND MAGAZINES OF YORE: PART 10
by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 9 appeared in OPUNTIA's #365, 366, 368, 371, 373, 375, 379, 388, and 499.]

The Beautiful People.

VANITY FAIR: SELECTIONS FROM AMERICA'S MOST MEMORABLE MAGAZINE (1960) was a coffee table book edited by Cleveland Amory and Frederic Bradlee. The magazine existed from 1914 until 1936. The publisher was Condé Nast, who hired Frank Crowninshield (granduncle of Bradlee) to edit the magazine.

The content was high-brow literary aimed at the clever people who socialized every week at cocktail parties and remembered the gilded age of the 1890s. The writers were household names of their era.

Most are forgotten, save for a few who might still be mentioned in a university literature course or a website seldom visited or updated. Probably in Wikipedia, the graveyard of obscurity.

Crowninshield wanted elegant and witty articles. He was famous for his rejection letters. Dickson Hartwell wrote that his rejections *“were so complimentary that they usually had to be read twice to discover whether he was making a nomination for the Pulitzer Prize or expressing regret”*.

Author Paul Gallico treasured his rejection slip: *“My dear boy, this is superb! A little masterpiece! What color! What life! How beautifully you have phrased it all! A veritable gem! Why don't you take it around to HARPER'S BAZAAR?”*

This book begins with Bradlee's biography of his granduncle. Crowninshield (1872-1947) advocated avant-garde art and writing, which often got him into trouble with advertisers. He was, strangely, somewhat a puritan in his private life and occasionally quite naive.

From there, an anthology of biographies, stories, and cultural news followed. It would be well for today's younger generation to read a book such as this. Shakespeare wrote it best, about players strutting and fretting, and then heard no more.

The great issues of those distant times are trivial today, in the same way our headlines will be deleted from the Internet decades from now for lack of readers. The titans who strode across the stage or political rally are now dull history seldom mentioned.

As examples, this anthology mentions forgotten names such as Elenora Duse, Maxine Elliott, and Vernon Castle. Some are still remembered though, such as George Bernard Shaw and Lizzie Borden. There were up-and-coming politicians such as Winston Churchill and Mahatma Gandhi, whose best years were still ahead.

The humorous articles mostly stand up to the test of time. Several were in the form of exchanges of telegrams and could be easily adapted today as exchanges of text messages. The magazine was heavy with celebrity photos and blurbs.

The Great Depression killed the magazine. Readers weren't interested in beautiful people indulging in conspicuous consumption at a time when most households struggled to put food on the table.

The February 1936 issue was the last. Condé Nast transferred a few columns and features to his other magazine VOGUE. That publication still survives but Nast's fortunes declined during the Depression. He died in 1942.

The Way We Were.

I've been slowly feeding my books into local Little Free Library boxes around my neighbourhood rather than have my heirs toss my library into a blue bin. They read books but on a screen. Occasionally I see an item in the LFL that I take for temporary perusal.

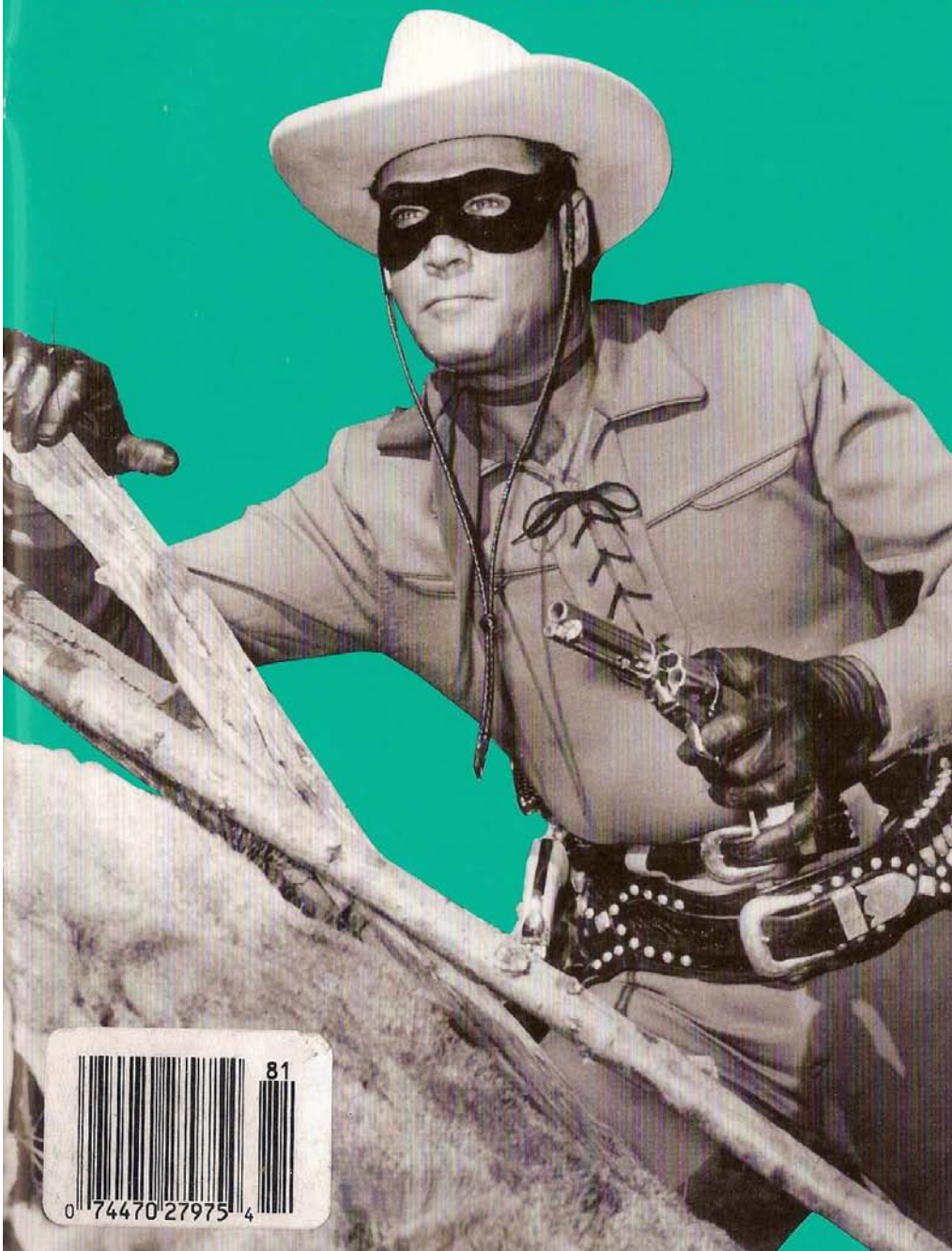
One such item was a digest magazine, the January 2008 issue of NOSTALGIA DIGEST, a publication I'd never heard of before. I checked the Internet and it is still publishing in both print and digital versions. Details at www.nostalgia digest.com

The magazine contains articles that would be mostly of personal interest to those in their 70s or 80s, or to younger people who are collectors of such. I was born after the golden age of radio but thanks to free downloads from the Old Time Radio Researchers at www.otrr.org/OTRRLibrary, I can enjoy those old radio shows.

Celebrating the 75th anniversary of THE LONE RANGER!

NOSTALGIA DIGEST

MAGAZINE • WINTER 2008 • \$4.00 U.S.



The issue at hand began with the history of The Lone Ranger on radio, where he was born, and early television, where he died. Then something about Don Loper, forgotten today but a famous dancer and dress designer in his day.

The evolution of radio news was discussed next, from battles between newspapers and radio. The press thought radio would destroy them but not so. That was done after the Millennium by the Internet. Seven pages follow of old-time radio shows streamed online, then old-time songs that won Oscars.

A radio announcer and disk jockey told stories of dealing with autocratic station owners. Nowadays the problem doesn't exist because deejays and announcers have mostly been replaced by national hookups run by cost-cutting bureaucrats.

The final article was about View Masters, those stereoscope slide viewers that allowed kids to watch a sequence of 3-D images. The author was ecstatic about his memories of them from the 1940s and 1950s and how he would view the slides for hours.

We had them when I was a kid in the 1960s but I only viewed them a few times. By then we had colour television. The article did remind me of how people were limited before my time in what images they could see. Mostly black-and-white newspaper photos, colour in the magazines, and black-and-white movies until the middle 1950s. Kids these days are spoiled.

ZINE LISTINGS

[I only list zines I receive from the Papernet. If the zine is posted on www.efanzines.com or www.fanac.org, then I don't mention it since you can read it directly.]

THE FOSSIL #398 (US\$10 from The Fossils Inc, c/o Tom Parson, 157 South Logan Street, Denver, Colorado 80209) Clubzine devoted to the history of zines. This issue begins with a look at how H.P. Lovecraft used the names of his friends in zinedom for his stories. Then some extensive research on female zinesters of the late 1800s, of which there were quite a few.

THE SOVIET UNIVERSE

by Dale Speirs

The Strugatsky Brothers.

In the past I haven't reviewed many translations of any author. The basic problem is that if some fault is found in how a translated story reads then one doesn't know who to blame, the author or the translator. The earlier translations of the Strugatsky brothers suffered from this problem. They had awkward phrases which, while grammatically correct, were not how an anglophone would say it.

DAW put out a series of paperback translations which were the only ones readily available for decades. Those were the books that introduced me to the Strugatskys. In recent years new and better translations have been appearing, which I have been picking up as I find them.

Many of the Strugatsky novels were part of a series set in the Wanderers or Noon Universe. Again, translation problems as to what name is used. In this universe, humans had begun to suspect that an alien race was monitoring them from afar. The aliens never appeared front and centre on stage.

I have reviewed some Strugatsky novels in previous issues of this zine. In issue #7.1 was a double book, THE SECOND INVASION FROM MARS, which I enjoyed, and FAR RAINBOW, which I couldn't penetrate past the first few pages, something I blamed on the translator.

MONDAY BEGINS ON SATURDAY was reviewed in issue #499. In issue #271, I reviewed a new translation of ROADSIDE PICNIC, comparing it to the older and poorer translation.

Which brings me to the book at hand. THE WAVES EXTINGUISH THE WIND (1986) by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky is now available in a 2023 translation by Daniels Umanovskis. Only after reading it did I discover that I already had an older translation under the title THE TIME WANDERERS, which I had never reviewed because it was so badly translated.

The protagonist was 89-year-old Maxim Kammerer, assisted by a young trainee Toivo Glumov. The former narrated the story via a series of documents and letters.

As the human race expanded into the galaxy, sentient alien species were encountered. The non-technological races were 'helped' to advance by progressors, humans who subtly steered the races from the background. Only now were humans beginning to wonder if some alien species was doing the same to themselves.

Kammerer reported on strange occurrences that eventually led to the Great Revelation. One of those events will be considered by post-pandemic readers in a much different interpretation than those who read the book before 2020. Fukamization was a prenatal procedure that introduced substances into human fetuses that made them immune to diseases and many medical problems.

The procedure was so successful that it was made mandatory worldwide. A small vocal minority opposed fukamization. Eventually the procedure was made voluntary. Afterwards the vast majority of pregnant women still had fukamization because it gave their children a boost.

The parallels with COVID-19 vaccines are startling. No future reader will read this chapter without making the comparison. Science fiction is a literature of ideas, not prophecy, but this section of the novel has become something more than the Strugatsky brothers intended or could have known.

Strange events and eldritch creatures cast forebodings and panics. Kammerer and Glumov investigated hither and yon, attempting to make sense of what was happening. A vast number of trivial clues cluttered the investigation.

Eventually a Wanderers progressor was identified, who was helping select individuals for a new species. *Homo ludens* would be the successor to *Homo sapiens*.

The two species would co-exist for a while before one was eased out of existence. When this novel was written, the Strugatsky brothers didn't know what we know today about how *Homo sapiens* co-existed with *Homo neanderthalensis*, then outcompeted them into extinction.

The Great Revelation was that there were no Wanderers, just ludens (as they called themselves) working to produce a new species out of the natural schism. Most ludens were already out among the stars. Their need for secrecy was obvious, for fear of backlash from those left behind. On that point the novel, and the series, concluded.

Clone Of My Own.

SELF-DISCOVERY (1979) was a science fiction novel by Ukrainian author Volodymyr (Vladimir) Savchenko, translated by Antonina W. Bouis. The novel was originally published in 1967 in the Russian language.

The protagonist was a cybernetics engineer Valentin Vasilyevich Krivoshein. Part of the story was his work on duplicating humans. The other part was how people adapted to bureaucracy.

To add realism, he was not a mad scientist working alone in a remote laboratory but was an employee with the Dneprovsk Institute of Systemology. There he waged war with the academicians headed by Arkady Arkadievich Azarov. Any reader who has done research at a university will appreciate the portrayal of the bureaucracy.

The plot began in Krivoshein's laboratory when a serious accident occurred. A young laboratory assistant was injured in mysterious circumstances. Krivoshein's body was found nearby. Police detective Matvei Apollonovich Onisimov examined the body again after looking over the rest of the scene. He discovered the flesh had melted off the bones into a gooey liquid, leaving only a skeleton. The transition happened in minutes.

There seemed to be several young men about who bore a startling resemblance to Krivoshein. His work in the laboratory dealt with what today we would call cloning. Step by step, the police and academicians attempted to find out exactly what he was Krivoshein had been doing.

The problem facing the police was they kept arresting men identical to Krivoshein, including fingerprints, but not him in actuality. Very disconcerting. Worse yet, some of the Krivosheins had shape-changing abilities. Not into other species but to change their faces and mimic other humans. They could heal themselves from serious injuries such as broken bones or knife slashes.

They were not invulnerable. Because they had been scattered about in different cities, they did not share common memories, even with their creator. Was the original Krivoshein still alive? How many of his clones were in circulation?

So ended the first part of the novel. I forgot to mention the novel was in three sections. The middle section jumped back in time and was narrated by the

original Krivoshein. He explained how his work produced a sentient computer that at first expanded by asking for and receiving vast amounts of additional transistors and memory cells.

The computer began teaching itself chemistry. It demanded and had Krivoshein set up for it all sorts of distillation apparatuses. On a hunch, Krivoshein set up a huge tank and routed the distilled products and other chemicals into the tank.

He left the laboratory for several days. Upon his return, he was shocked to find his double walking around the campus. More so because he hadn't realized he was so flabby. His first thought therefore was that he should be doing more physical exercise.

The double (later named Adam) had Krivoshein's memories until being formed in the tank, then different ones after clambering out and finding clothes. Krivoshein was astonished but Adam asked him why would the computer create an octopus or anything else when it had studied its maker so closely.

They went back to the laboratory and were horrified to discover the computer was trying to reconstruct other humans from Krivoshein's memories. The creatures came out warped; a distorted girlfriend Lena, his father but only as he was on a deathbed.

Krivoshein and Adam couldn't shut off the computer. They had to take turns aborting the humans forming in the tank and dissolving them back into primordial goo. Then the computer created tentacles with eyes and attempted to take over the laboratory. They stymied it by turning off the flow of nutrients into the tank.

The two men quarreled and went their separate ways. The original computer womb was finally controlled by using a Monomakh crown, a cap with electrodes. The crown enabled the user to control the computer by thoughts.

The story went into a flashback. Krivoshein had tried 25 times to create a duplicate of himself. Each time he failed and ordered the computer to dissolve the duplicate. On the 26th attempt, he succeeded and Adam climbed out of the tank. Adam was angry because he had memories of 25 deaths. What Krivoshein didn't know was that to save time for each synthesis, the computer stored the consciousness of the duplicates during dissolution. Adam lived one death after another.

The two men agreed to separate because if they stayed together in the same laboratory, they would always be feuding. Krivoshein produced a third duplicate which he named Kravets. He then tried to upgrade his body by climbing into the tank and ordering the computer to heal his health problems. Something went wrong.

Those complications were cleared up. The trio of Krivosheins managed to sort things out with police and provide plausible explanations. The police were happy because they could mark the case solved, which would look good in their quarterly statistics. The novel ended with the duplicates strolling about and discuss the philosophy of cloning humans. Another happy ending in the Soviet empire.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

[Editor’s remarks in square brackets. Please include your name and town when sending a comment. Email to opuntia57@hotmail.com]

FROM: Steve Green
Birmingham, England

2024-02-09

[Re: review of Hancock radio episode in issue #565] Given the BBC’s vice-like grip on its intellectual property, not sure why old-time radio archivists consider material such as HANCOCK’S HALF HOUR to be in the public domain, but at least it saves you having to pay the extortionate prices the Beeb charges for its CD releases.

[The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation is just as tight-fisted with its old-time radio archive, which is why I seldom have reviews of their shows. A few of the more popular modern shows such as Royal Canadian Air Farce were available on cassettes and CDs back when.]

Coincidentally, May marks the centenary of Tony Hancock’s birth and I’ve been commissioned by one of the UK newsstand magazines to write a piece on the months leading up to his sad demise in 1968, whilst attempting to revive his career with an Australian tv series.

SEEN IN THE LITERATURE

Astronomy.

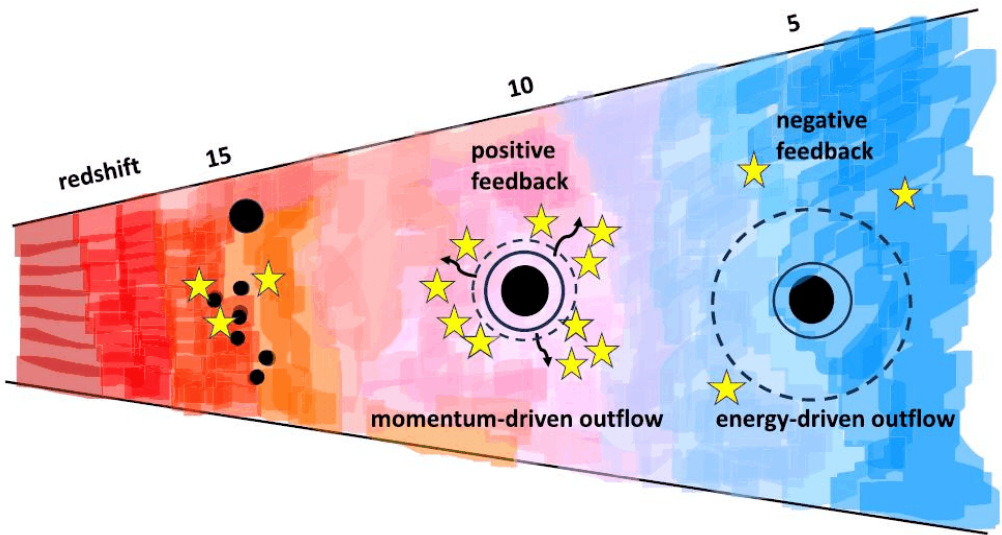
Silk, J., et al (2024) **Which came first: Supermassive black holes or galaxies? Insights from JWST.** ASTROPHYSICAL JOURNAL LETTERS 961:doi.org/10.3847/2041-8213/ad1bf0 (available as a free pdf)

[Supermassive black holes appear to have formed as soon as the earliest galaxies and encouraged star formation by whipping dust and gases around.]

Authors’ abstract: *Insights from JWST observations suggest that active galactic nuclei feedback evolved from a short-lived, high redshift phase in which radiatively cooled turbulence and/or momentum-conserving outflows stimulated vigorous early star formation (“positive” feedback), to late, energy-conserving outflows that depleted halo gas reservoirs and quenched star formation.*

The transition between these two regimes occurred at $z \sim 6$, independently of galaxy mass, for simple assumptions about the outflows and star formation process. Observational predictions provide circumstantial evidence for the prevalence of massive black holes at the highest redshifts hitherto observed, and we discuss their origins.

[Image is from this paper.]



Planets.

Fu, M., et al (2024) **Impact-induced initiation of Snowball Earth: A model study.** SCIENCE ADVANCES 10:doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.adk5489 (available as a free pdf)

Authors’ abstract: *During the Neoproterozoic and Paleoproterozoic eras, geological evidence points to several “Snowball Earth” episodes when most of Earth’s surface was covered in ice. These global-scale glaciations represent the most marked climate changes in Earth’s history.*

We show that the impact winter following an asteroid impact comparable in size to the Chicxulub impact could have led to a runaway ice-albedo feedback and global glaciation. Using a state-of-the-art atmosphere-ocean climate model, we simulate the climate response following an impact for pre-industrial, Last Glacial Maximum (LGM), Cretaceous-like, and Neoproterozoic climates.

While warm ocean temperatures in the preindustrial and Cretaceous-like climates prevent Snowball initiation, the colder oceans of the LGM and cold Neoproterozoic climate scenarios rapidly form sea ice and demonstrate high sensitivity to the initial condition of the ocean.

Given suggestions of a cold pre-Snowball climate, we argue the initiation of Snowball Earth by a large impact is a robust possible mechanism, as previously suggested by others, and conclude by discussing geologic tests.

During the Cryogenian period of the Neoproterozoic (720 to 635 megayears ago), multiple lines of evidence point to at least two “Snowball Earth” episodes when ice extended to the equator.

The onset of the first event, the Sturtian glaciation, has been dated to 717.5 to 716.3 Ma, while the second, the Marinoan glaciation, began around 650 to 639 Ma.

A number of glacial deposits have also been identified during the Palaeoproterozoic, with at least one of them interpreted as evidence of a Snowball event. These global-scale glaciations reflect the most marked climate changes in Earth’s known history.

Satellites.

Lainey, V., et al (2024) **A recently formed ocean inside Saturn’s moon Mimas.** NATURE 626:doi.org/10.1038/s41586-023-06975-9

Authors’ abstract: *Moons potentially harbouring a global ocean are tending to become relatively common objects in the Solar System. The presence of these long-lived global oceans is generally betrayed by surface modification owing to internal dynamics. Hence, Mimas would be the most unlikely place to look for the presence of a global ocean.*

Here, from detailed analysis of Mimas’s orbital motion based on Cassini data, with a particular focus on Mimas’s periapsis drift, we show that its heavily cratered icy shell hides a global ocean, at a depth of 20 to 30 kilometres. Eccentricity damping implies that the ocean is likely to be less than 25 million years old and still evolving.

Our simulations show that the ocean-ice interface reached a depth of less than 30 kilometres only recently (less than 2 to 3 million years ago), a time span too short for signs of activity at Mimas’s surface to have appeared.

Origin Of Life.

Haas, S., et al (2024) **Biogeochemical explanations for the world’s most phosphate-rich lake, an origin-of-life analog.** COMMUNICATIONS EARTH AND ENVIRONMENT 5:doi.org/10.1038/s43247-023-01192-8 (available as a free pdf)

Authors’ abstract: *Environmental phosphate concentrations are typically much lower than needed for prebiotic phosphorylation of nucleosides, critical for the origin of life. Here, we tested hypotheses explaining highly concentrated dissolved phosphate in carbonate-rich “soda” lakes by examining phosphorus and nitrogen cycling in Last Chance Lake and Goodenough Lake, Canada.*

We find a lack of geochemical phosphorus precipitation, that sedimentary calcium is in dolomite rather than apatite, and that N2-fixation rates, probably suppressed by high salinity, are too low to create significant biological phosphate demand.

Thus, nitrogen limitation of biological production and precipitation of calcium-rich carbonate instead of apatite combine to allow unimpeded evaporative phosphate buildup in Last Chance Lake to the highest known natural levels due to small biological and geochemical phosphorus sinks.

Forming on basaltic rock, which was likely common on early Earth, evaporative soda lakes were consequently plausible origin-of-life settings with sufficient phosphate for prebiotic synthesis.

Evaporative lakes have been identified as promising settings for the origin of life on Earth during the Hadean (4.6 to 4.0 gigayears ago) because they can concentrate the major biogenic elements (C, H, N, O, P, S) as NO_x - or NH₄⁺, sulfite or sulfide, cyanide, and phosphate. Their concentration is crucial for enabling the prebiotic synthesis of nucleotides, amino acids, sugars, and lipid precursors.

Soda lakes, which are alkaline and saline water bodies dominated by sodium, (bi)carbonate, and chloride ions, are often rich in phosphate and may therefore resolve the phosphate problem of the origin of life, a discrepancy between the typically low environmental phosphate concentrations and the high levels used in prebiotic nucleotide-forming phosphorylation experiments

Wuchty, S., et al (2024) **Minor intron-containing genes as an ancient backbone for viral infection?**. PNAS NEXUS 3:doi.org/10.1093/pnasnexus/pgad479 (available as a free pdf)

Authors' abstract: *Minor intron-containing genes (MIGs) account for <2% of all human protein-coding genes and are uniquely dependent on the minor spliceosome for proper excision.*

Despite their low numbers, we surprisingly found a significant enrichment of MIG-encoded proteins (MIG-Ps) in protein-protein interactomes and host factors of positive-sense RNA viruses, including SARS-CoV-1, SARS-CoV-2, MERS coronavirus, and Zika virus.

Similarly, we observed a significant enrichment of MIG-Ps in the interactomes and sets of host factors of negative-sense RNA viruses such as Ebola virus, influenza A virus, and the retrovirus HIV-1.

We also found an enrichment of MIG-Ps in double-stranded DNA viruses such as Epstein–Barr virus, human papillomavirus, and herpes simplex viruses.

In general, MIG-Ps were highly connected and placed in central positions in a network of human-host protein interactions. Moreover, MIG-Ps that interact with viral proteins were enriched with essential genes.

We also provide evidence that viral proteins interact with ancestral MIGs that date back to unicellular organisms and are mainly involved in basic cellular functions such as cell cycle, cell division, and signal transduction.

Our results suggest that MIG-Ps form a stable, evolutionarily conserved backbone that viruses putatively tap to invade and propagate in human host cells.

Paleobiology.

Bierenbroodspot, M.J., et al (2024) **Phylogenomic insights into the first multicellular streptophyte.** CURRENT BIOLOGY 34:doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2023.12.070 (available as a free pdf)

[Streptophytes are all land plants plus the aquatic green algae they evolved from. A clade is a line of evolutionary descent.]

Authors' abstract: *Streptophytes are best known as the clade containing the teeming diversity of embryophytes (land plants). Next to embryophytes are however a range of freshwater and terrestrial algae that bear important information on the emergence of key traits of land plants.*

Among these, the Klebsormidiophyceae stand out. Thriving in diverse environments, from mundane (ubiquitous occurrence on tree barks and rocks) to extreme (from the Atacama Desert to the Antarctic), Klebsormidiophyceae can exhibit filamentous body plans and display remarkable resilience as colonizers of terrestrial habitats.

Currently, the lack of a robust phylogenetic framework for the Klebsormidiophyceae hampers our understanding of the evolutionary history of these key traits. Here, we conducted a phylogenomic analysis utilizing advanced models that can counteract systematic biases.

We sequenced 24 new transcriptomes of Klebsormidiophyceae and combined them with 14 previously published genomic and transcriptomic datasets.

Using an analysis built on 845 loci and sophisticated mixture models, we establish a phylogenomic framework, dividing the six distinct genera of Klebsormidiophyceae in a novel three-order system, with a deep divergence more than 830 million years ago.

Our reconstructions of ancestral states suggest (1) an evolutionary history of multiple transitions between terrestrial-aquatic habitats, with stem Klebsormidiales having conquered land earlier than embryophytes, and (2) that the body plan of the last common ancestor of Klebsormidiophyceae was multicellular, with a high probability that it was filamentous whereas the sarcinoids and unicells in Klebsormidiophyceae are likely derived states.

We provide evidence that the first multicellular streptophytes likely lived about a billion years ago.

Zoology.

Lindsay, D.J., et al (2024) **A new subfamily of ulmarid scyphomedusae, the Santjordiinae, with a description of Santjordia pagesi gen. et sp. nov. (Cnidaria: Scyphozoa: Discomedusae: Semaestomeae: Ulmaridae) from the Sumisu Caldera, Ogasawara Islands, Japan.** ZOOTAXA 4:doi.org/10.11646/zootaxa.5374.4.5 (available as a free pdf)

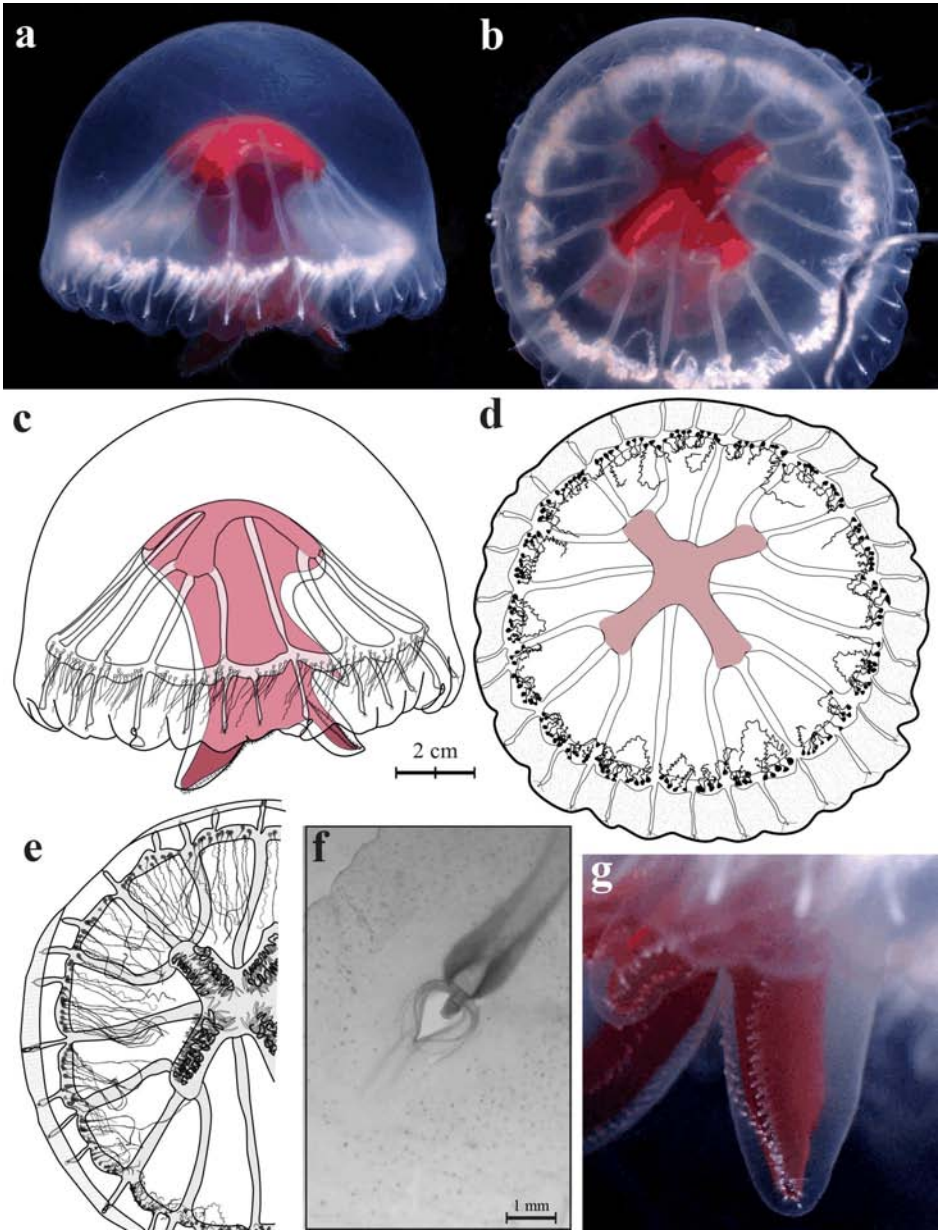
Authors’ abstract: *An undescribed species of ulmarid medusa was observed in situ and captured at 812 m depth within the Sumisu Caldera, Ogasawara Islands, Japan.*

Morphological and molecular evidence points to it being distinct from other ulmarid medusae and a new species (pagesi), genus (Santjordia) and subfamily (Santjordiinae) are herein erected to contain it.

This new subfamily of semaestome ulmarid medusae has both marginal and subumbrellar rhopalia, making it unique within the order Semaestomeae. Although the combination of subumbrellar tentacles and the lack of branched canals should warrant the erection of a new family within the Semaestomeae,

a lack of information on the gonad structure and poor bootstrap support in the molecular phylogenetic tree cause us to relegate it to the catch-all family Ulmaridae, until greater taxon sampling and phylogenetic analyses are carried out for the Semaestomeae.

[Images are from this paper.]



Pomeroy, D., et al (2024) **Habituation of large mammals to passing vehicles.** AFRICAN JOURNAL OF ECOLOGY 62:doi.org/10.1111/aje.13243

Authors’ abstract: *Over a period of 2 years, we noted that many large mammals in the Murchison Falls National Park, Uganda, remained fairly close to the road, rather than running away, as we drove past at a relatively slow speed, of about 20 to 25 kph.*

We consider that over recent years, many of these animals have become habituated to tourist vehicles passing nearby and we recorded the minimum distances at which nine common species remained at, or close to the road edge as we drove past. Many stayed still actually at the edge, while Oribis and Hartebest sometimes remained on the road itself.

Speirs: Well, any farm kid could have told them that. Domestic livestock grazing next to a highway are not disturbed by traffic. The southern boundary of our ranch was a busy highway. The cows grazed along the fence, taking no note of motor vehicles. When the calves were born in spring, they were easily startled at first. When they noticed Mama Cow paid no mind they eventually calmed down.

I’m sure city slickers (as I am now) have noticed that magpies, squirrels, snowshoe hares, crows, and other urban wildlife have adapted to noisy vehicles. And, judging by roadkill, perhaps carelessly so.

Environmental Science.

Venter, Z.S., et al (2024) **Reassessing the role of urban green space in air pollution control.** PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA 121:doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2306200121 (available as a free pdf)

Authors’ abstract: *The assumption that vegetation improves air quality is prevalent in scientific, popular, and political discourse. However, experimental and modeling studies show the effect of green space on air pollutant concentrations in urban settings is highly variable and context specific.*

We revisited the link between vegetation and air quality using satellite-derived changes of urban green space and air pollutant concentrations from 2,615

established monitoring stations over Europe and the United States. Between 2010 and 2019, stations recorded declines in ambient NO₂, (particulate matter) PM₁₀, and PM_{2.5}, pointing to the general success of recent policy interventions to restrict anthropogenic emissions.

The effect size of total green space on air pollution was weak and highly variable, particularly at the street scale (15 to 60 metres radius) where vegetation can restrict ventilation.

However, when isolating changes in tree cover, we found a negative association with air pollution at borough to city scales (120 to 16,000 metres) particularly for O₃ and PM.

The effect of green space was smaller than the pollutant deposition and dispersion effects of meteorological drivers including precipitation, humidity, and wind speed. When averaged across spatial scales, a one standard-deviation increase in green space resulted in a 0.8% decline in air pollution.

Our findings suggest that while urban greening may improve air quality at the borough-to-city scale, the impact is moderate and may have detrimental street-level effects depending on aerodynamic factors like vegetation type and urban form.

Qin, L., et al (2024) **Unexpected hydroxyl radical production in brewed tea under sunlight.** PNAS NEXUS 3:doi.org/10.1093/pnasnexus/pgae015 (available as a free pdf)

Authors’ abstract: *Tea is one of the world's most popular and widely consumed beverages. It is a common pastime to enjoy a cup of tea in the sunshine. However, little attention has been given to understanding the possible photochemical reactions occurring beneath the calm surface of brewed tea.*

Epigallocatechin gallate (EGCG), which is widely used in food and beverages, is the most significant active ingredient found in tea. In this study, we investigated the presence of free radicals in both an aqueous EGCG solution and brewed tea under simulated sunlight conditions.

To our surprise, we unexpectedly observed the production of hydroxyl radicals (•OH) in brewed tea. It was found that sunlight irradiation played a critical role in the formation of •OH, independent of the presence of metal ions.

Furthermore, we demonstrated that the •OH generated from the EGCG aqueous solution induced cell cytotoxicity and DNA damage in vitro.

Considering the crucial role of •OH in various fields, including human health and the environment, it is important to further explore the practical implications of •OH production in brewed tea under sunlight.

In summary, our study unveils the unexpected formation of •OH in brewed tea and emphasizes the significance of sunlight-induced reactions. The observed cytotoxic and DNA- damaging effects of •OH emphasize the importance of understanding the potential health consequences associated with tea consumption.

Modern Humans.

Kim, K., et al (2024) **Disrupted routines anticipate musical exploration.**
PROCEEDINGS OF THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES USA
121:doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2306549121 (available as a free pdf)

Authors’ abstract: Understanding and predicting the emergence and evolution of cultural tastes manifested in consumption patterns is of central interest to social scientists, analysts of culture, and purveyors of content.

Prior research suggests that taste preferences relate to personality traits, values, shifts in mood, and immigration destination. Understanding everyday patterns of listening and the function music plays in life has remained elusive, however, despite speculation that musical nostalgia may compensate for local disruption.

Using more than one hundred million streams of four million songs by tens of thousands of international listeners from a global music service, we show that breaches in personal routine are systematically associated with personal musical exploration.

As people visited new cities and countries, their preferences diversified, converging toward their travel destinations. As people experienced the very different disruptions associated with COVID-19 lockdowns, their preferences diversified further.

Personal explorations did not tend to veer toward the global listening average, but away from it, toward distinctive regional musical content. Exposure to novel music explored during periods of routine disruption showed a persistent influence on listeners’ future consumption patterns.

Across all of these settings, musical preference reflected rather than compensated for life’s surprises, leaving a lasting legacy on tastes. We explore the relationship between these findings and global patterns of behavior and cultural consumption.

Speirs: Does this explain Taylor Swift? Answers on a postcard, please.