

Notice

HOW TO OPEN A BOOK

LAY the book, back downward, on a table or smooth surface. Press the front cover down until it touches the table, then the back cover, holding the leaves in one hand while you open a few of the leaves at the back, then at the front, alternately pressing them down gently until you reach the centre of the volume. This should be done two or three times. Never open a book violently nor bend back the covers. It is liable not only to break the back but to loosen the leaves.

THE GRAIN GROWERS' GUIDE

Book Dept.

WINNIPEG

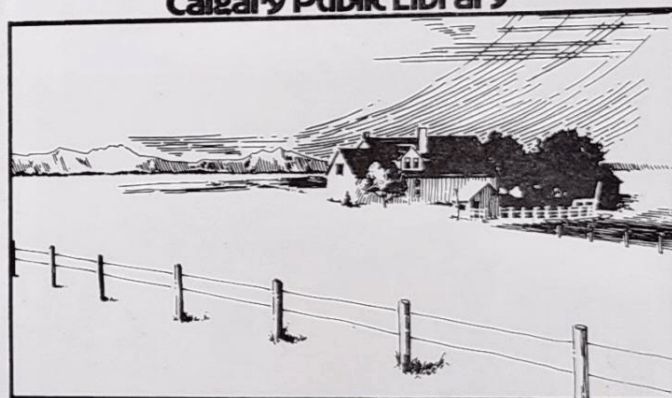
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Calgary Public Library



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Bracken, John, 1883-1969.

Dry farming in Western Canada

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CALGARY PUBLIC LIBRARY

Middle August 2024

Opuntia is published by Dale Speirs, Calgary, Alberta. It is posted on www.efanzines.com and www.fanac.org. There is also a cumulative subject index to all issues available at those sites. 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

I was doing some research in the Local History section of the New Central Library in downtown Calgary when I came across this book, published in 1921. Somehow it fitted the theme of this issue, all about books and the people who love them.

WHEN WORDS COLLIDE 2024

photos by Dale Speirs

Calgary's annual readercon was held at the Delta Southland Drive Hotel on the weekend of August 16 to 18. Lots of panels about writing, editing, and publishing, emphasizing genre fiction.

Of course I couldn't get to every seminar I wanted to see but that's convention-going everywhere. The panel reports are grouped by theme, not in chronological order. The blurbs from the programme schedule are in italics and my reports in normal text.

Registration was quick and easy. Below was the opening ceremony.

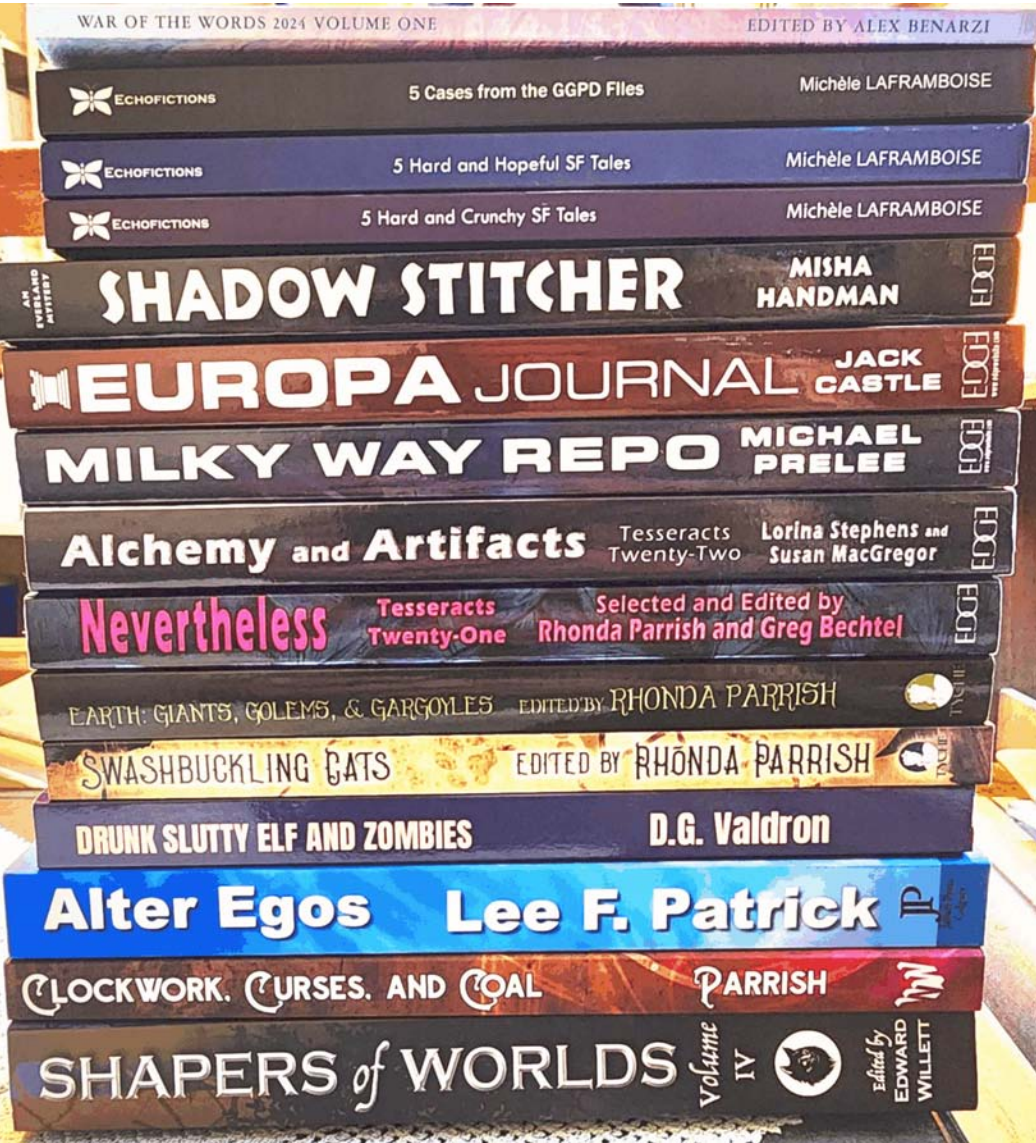


I walked into the dealer bourse and who did I see?



Above: Edward Willett, besides being a published author and broadcaster, has his own small press. He is shown here at his table making a sale.

Only books were sold in the bourse. No superhero masks, crystals, or movie doodads. There were a few book dealers but most of the tables were small-press publishers and authors' associations. I bought the stack shown here, so expect reviews in future issues of this zine. My purchases qualified me for a free tote bag (below right).





Lots of associations to provide services to writers.

AND SO TO THE PANELS

Here are the panels which I attended. Photos of groups show the panelists names from left to right under the title. The reports are sorted by theme, not chronology.

THE CRAFT OF WRITING

The Glue Factor

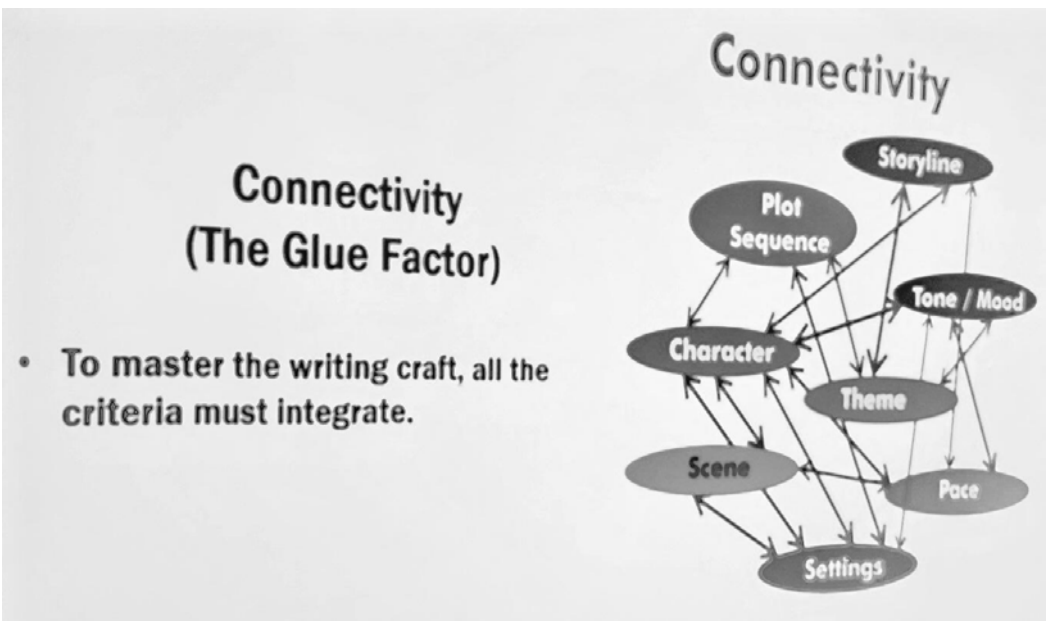
Karl Buchner

Evolving writers often take courses to improve their writing, yet experience difficulty integrating their learnings into an engaging presentation. The session deals with building the mental filters through which the writer achieves reader engagement.

The Glue Factor covers the importance of genre and theme, evolution of plot sequences to unfold the storyline, writing through the eyes and senses of the POV character, settings in support of action and drama, maintaining POV, sentence structure, meaningful dialogue, and several other criteria, all coming together as a cohesive whole.

Buchner began by saying that editing was like combining wheat, separating the chaff and straws from the golden seeds. For a publisher, the story must hit the ground running. Characters must have agency, that is, they make choices and do things with effect. They are not just buffeted around by events.

“*The writing craft is learnable*”, said Buchner. Genre fiction has to meet readers’ expectations. Failing to follow genre tenets leaves the reader feeling cheated. As an example, an urban fantasy must take place in a city, not as a quest through magical forests.



Writing Humour And Other Terrifying Things

Andrew Buckley

“One person’s giggle is another person’s groan” A literary agent shared this insight with me nearly two decades ago when I submitted my first novel (a work of satirical fiction). Although he loved the book, he confessed his apprehension about representing humour.

This interactive presentation explores humour in its various forms, addresses the boundaries of political correctness, provides guidance on fearlessly writing humour, and emphasizes the importance of laughter in our daily lives.



There was an overflow audience. Buckley helped bring in some more chairs from the corridor. I’m still kicking myself for not getting photos of him hauling in chairs. But away he went with lots of laughs, including the joke about the Scotsman and the goat, which brought down the house.

He had a slide show with bullet points, each of which he illustrated with a good joke. He was very good as a stand-up comedian. Humour, he pointed out,

contains surprise, incongruity, irony, and absurdity. Unfortunately these days political correctness casts limits.

Hyperbolic humour is difficult to write because reality is often ahead of it. Think of the 2024 American presidential campaign, then imagine you wrote it up as fiction in 1999 and submitted the story. Editors would not accept it because the events were so ridiculous.

Map-Making For Authors

Amanda Witow

Words are the bread-and-butter of writers, so sometimes the need to draw something, like a map, can be intimidating. Whether it’s a country, city, or building, there are tricks and strategies for making maps that even the most artistically challenged writers can manage.

Maps help keep the story organized and free of gaffes such as moving an army across a mountain range in one day. Generally use one map for each location. The detail of a map will depend on the detail of the location in the story. Detail and style will vary between maps for the author’s use in constructing the story and those intended for publication.

Style includes contour, navigation, political, or cultural mapping. Initially maps can be hand-drawn but if for publication then you may have to pay someone unless you have good graphic skills on a computer.



Villainous Mistakes: How To Prevent Them

Laurie Carmichael

Looking to create a realistic villain? Avoid the murderous mistakes and common pitfalls writers experience when creating their formidable foe.

The difference between a hero and a villain is that the latter uses power to hurt other people. A common mistake in writing villains is to make them cartoon flat, stereotypical characters. Rounded villains are complex, realistic, and occasionally surprise with nice behaviour.

Villains should not be evil for evil's sake. When writing one, put yourself in their shoes and add human motives. Alien villains will not have the same values but will have the same motives, such as survival or protecting their young. A villain can be a hero's evil twin to illustrate how choices in life affect subsequent behaviour.

The villain must not be too weak but neither should it be unstoppable. There must be a flaw or weak point that eventually allows the hero to succeed. Provide a background story to explain why they became villains.



Blending Genres

Robin van Eck, Sarah L. Pratt, Wendy McGrath, D.G. Valdron, Dorothy Bentley

Are you interested in blending genres in creative writing? This panel will explore mixing elements from different genres to create unique and engaging narratives.



Valdron said genre is a marketing method so that readers know what to expect. Blending genres could mess up sales but also stretch books into different categories to reach new readers.

McGrath said authors have to write what they like and not worry about boundaries. Writing is hard enough without taking the fun out of it.

van Eck said the rules of genre discouraged her when she first began writing. She had to learn to disregard the accepted dogma.

Chat GPT And Me: Exploring Expression, Evils, And Ethics Of AI In Creative Writing

Charles James, Heather Bonin MacIntosh, Precious de Leon, Cari Frame, Andrew Buckley, ChatGPT

Ever wonder what Chat GPT has to say for itself regarding expression, evils, and ethics of its own role in creative writing? Curious about how a human writer or publisher might respond? Then this panel is for you! Join us as we discuss the evils of AI, opportunities for writers and readers, transparency, imagination, and what it means to create.



Yes, ChatGPT was one of the panelists. A show of hands indicated that the majority of the audience did not consider AI software either evil or good but just a tool.

James said one major worry about AI is that no one knows what they are trained on, leading to unrecognized biases. MacIntosh said teachers have no end of problems with student essays because of AI. Buckley said AI is a new form of copyright piracy.

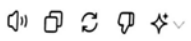
Frame said that AI fiction will be derivative because the software cannot create anything that wasn't already scanned into its data banks. She could discern AI content in her students' essays because the writing was vacuous and had no substance. Paragraphs had good grammar but just vague remarks.

ChatGPT was then asked to write a story based on audience improvisation, first in the style of Nabokov, then Asimov. The paragraphs were basically vignettes where nothing happened. (The white patch on the Asimov screen was a screen reflection I didn't notice until after the panel was over.)

What was most interesting was that ChatGPT gave us two versions of Asimov and asked us which was best. This, said Frame, was an example of how AIs are not only learning from databases but also from their users.

Create the first paragraph of a book set in space, where a rabbit is a test subject in a rocket in the style of Nabokov.

The rabbit, with its silken fur of dusk and dawn, trembled slightly in the weightless cocoon of the rocket's sterile chamber, a living paradox of innocence and science. Its eyes, wide orbs of liquid night, reflected the stars outside, those distant, unblinking witnesses to the silent trajectory of its fate. The hum of the ship, a low, continuous purr, was both a lullaby and a dirge, an echo of the cold and indifferent cosmos that cradled this small, warm creature. In the labyrinth of wires and blinking lights, the rabbit floated—a marionette of biology and physics—its delicate whiskers twitching in time with the pulse of the universe, as if sensing the invisible strings of destiny that held it in this peculiar dance among the stars.



ChatGPT

The rabbit had always thought of itself as more of a carrot enthusiast. As a cosmic adventurer, found itself floating in the rather disorienting confines of a rocket ship, pondering the curious turn of events that led to its current predicament. The universe, it seemed, had a sense of humor, which the rabbit was beginning to suspect was at its expense. The control panel blinked and beeped in a manner that suggested it knew exactly what it was doing, which was more than could be said for the rabbit. If it had been a little more familiar with the finer points of astrophysics—or anything beyond the immediate vicinity of its hutch—it might have been able to appreciate the sheer improbability of its situation. But as it was, the rabbit could only twitch its nose and wonder if there was any chance of finding a nice bit of lettuce somewhere out there in the vast, indifferent reaches of space.

I prefer this response

Evolution 2

The rabbit, who had been quite content nibbling on carrots back on Earth, now found itself floating in a spaceship, pondering the cosmic absurdity of it all. The spaceship's control panel, which seemed to be designed by a committee of slightly drunk engineers, blinked cheerfully, as if unaware that its sole passenger was a small, slightly bewildered rabbit. Somewhere in the vastness of space, far away from any logical sense of reason, the rabbit twitched its nose and wondered why it had agreed to this in the first place—if indeed it had ever been asked.

I prefer this response

FUN WITH EDITING

There were multiple live-action slush readings during WWC for various genres. The panelists judging the events were editors and publishers. Contestants anonymously supplied the first page of their story to a lector. These were dignified events, not a comic events making fun of writers.

The lector read aloud the story until two or more of the judges raised their hand. Usually the contestants got about halfway before a hand went up. At that point the reading stopped and the judges gave a critique, trying as much as possible to be objective and encouraging while pointing out the problem.

Live Action Slush - Fantasy/Urban Fantasy

Angela Ackerman, Bonnie Jacoby, Ashley Keller, Ella Beaumont, Krista Wallace

Bring the first page of your Fantasy/Urban Fantasy manuscript to be anonymously read aloud and receive feedback from our panel of editors.

Jacoby mentioned that most people knew how to write a good opening paragraph but tripped up in the next few paragraphs. There should not be any infodumps in the beginning pages, however much they may be tolerated in the middle of a story.



Live Action Slush - Mystery/Crime

Julie Hiner, Anthony Bidulka, Jonathan Whitelaw, Carlyne Topdjian, Wayne Arthurson

Bring the first page of your mystery or crime manuscript to be anonymously read aloud and receive feedback from our panel of editors.

Arthurson mentioned that one story suddenly jumped back in time after the first paragraph. Instead of a flashback, the story should have just opened in the present time and stayed there. In another story, panelists mentioned the writing was a bit too emphatic. Don't overstress a point once it has been made.



Live Action Slush - Science Fiction

R Graeme Cameron, Susan Forest, Michael Martineck, Ella Beaumont, Robert J. Sawyer, Kevin Weir

Bring the first page of your science fiction manuscript to be anonymously read aloud and receive feedback from our panel of editors. (Please indicate the genre at the top of the page.)

Both Forest and Sawyer said they were willing to overlook minor faults in a manuscript as long as the writing was generally competent.



Within the vast expanse of publishing, it's easy for authors to feel overwhelmed. The goal of this workshop is to provide a clear understanding of your options, the marketing services available to you, and develop an informed opinion on how to best move forward in your publishing journey.

Janzen emphasized that no matter how good your book is, unless people know about it, publication is useless. Determine your target audience and set a realistic budget that you can spend. An audience member commented that in book publicity there is a fine line between persistence and annoyance.

Blog and ask for feedback, but no spamming. Self-publishing means self-promotion and must be continuous, not just a few isolated efforts. Provide bonus material for the audience they can't get elsewhere. Always insure books are available.

Your major expense will be time. Books should be available on a wide variety of platforms, not just Amazon. Use print-on-demand to buy 20 or so copies to sell at conventions or readings. Traditional book publishers print books in hundreds or thousands, which is expensive.

THE BUSINESS OF PUBLISHING

Self Publisher's Guide To Marketing

Leanne Janzen

Marketing is one of the most important elements of a self-publishing author's journey. Whether you're planning to make this a career or fulfilling a passion project, you'll want to ensure you establish the right marketing strategy for your book.

This workshop will provide an overview of the foundational marketing practices needed to build an audience for your book prior to publication and in the long term. We'll also explore the differences between hiring a company to handle your book promotion versus executing those pieces yourself with or without coaching.



Grant Writing 101: Calgary Arts Development, Alberta Foundation for the Arts, and Canada Council Grants

Susan Forest

Writing a convincing proposal is an artform in itself. What are the qualities adjudicators are looking for, and what is the process for applying? Come to this one-session mini-workshop with your questions and ideas.



Grants are not free money because you have to work for them. Forest discussed grants from the Calgary and Alberta governments and Canada Council. Firstly, you must have residency as appropriate, such as being a Calgarian if applying for a CAD grant or an Albertan for money from the AFA.

Other requirements include being recognized by peers, have had professional publications, and a letter of reference. Once these requirements are met, then access is granted to the websites where the application forms are. Categories to apply for include art production, marketing your work, research, professional development, and travel.

You must adhere to a timeline for your work and provide a final report plus the work. Lots of forms to fill online. Project description is the make-or-break part of the application. A budget is required, both operating and capital, plus your resume, writing sample, and marketing plan. For travel or education you must have an official invitation to an event or acceptance into an educational course.

Juries may not understand genre fiction, therefore you have to be explicit. Results are final and there is no feedback or appeal. Normal time for an acceptance or rejection is five months. The juries change every six months, so a re-application might be successful.

Going Indie (And What That Means, Anyway)

Brenna Bailey-Davies, L.A. Cunningham, Rebekah Raymond, Andrew Snook, Jonathan Sean Lyster

Publishing a book is more accessible than ever, and there are many different paths you can take. Going indie and self-publishing can be intimidating, but with a little more information it doesn't need to be.



Lyster said he began by getting published in as many different online self-publishing websites as possible. With time and experience he then thinned out the sites that weren't working and is now concentrating on Amazon and other big sites. Sales matter.

Bailey-Davies mentioned one advantage of print-on-demand publishers is that an author can buy small quantities of books for resale instead of job lots from traditional publishers. She said that if you self-publish then you must be business-like and not treat it as a hobby.

Cunningham mentioned that the big problem was trying to be heard over millions of other competitors. Indie authors have to do more work marketing.

Raymond said when she first went indie she was swamped by too much information on how to do it. The panelists agreed that multiple publishers provide better sales and redundancy if trouble develops with a particular publisher.

FANTASY

Power Dynamics In Fantastical Worlds

Calvin Jim, Jonathan Sean Lyster, Cat Girczyc, Arlene F. Marks, Michael Martineck

In many tales, plot dynamics hinge on who has power and who doesn't. Panelists will talk how writers handle power ebbs and flows when writing fantasies.

Martineck said stories are not about political power per se but the struggle to obtain it or hang on to it. Jim remarked that power is defined by how close you can get to implementing your ultimate goals.

Girczyc said power cannot be considered in isolation because a kingdom will be surrounded by others. There will be groups scheming not for the throne but for the power behind the throne.



Real Medieval Life Versus Fantasy's Medieval Life

Ron S. Friedman, Marie Powell, David Worsick

What a dragon should know about real castle sieges. Compares real medieval life with its fantasy counterparts, focusing on aspects like castle sieges.

Powell said that human behaviour then and now was the same. Only the technology has changed. Travel was as common in medieval times as today but slower since people had to walk or float in boats.

Worsick said most fantasy battle scenes are not realistic. The troops fought in lines, not melees. Soldiers didn't fight one-on-one but guarded each other's sides as well as in front of them. Every soldier wore conspicuous colours to identify friend or foe, not camouflage like today.



Newall said there were three types of fanfic writers: play with the world, insert themselves into the world, and fix perceived problems with the worlds. The writers must be respectful of the characters and not impose new behaviour on them.

The fanfic must stand on its own and not rely on the reader having prior knowledge of the movie or television show. Newell wrote Outlander fanfic and had it proofread by her husband, who never watched the originals.

Adkins said it was a way of putting herself out there. She immersed herself in the history of 1800s England to write her romance pastiches. She grew up near Banff Springs Hotel, a stately pile if ever there was one, so she had personal experience of what a manor house would be like.

Weir said not to take shortcuts by relying on readers to know obscure details from the originals. Vos mentioned there are websites listing what copyrights expired and therefore which stories and characters are in the public domain.

All the panelists remarked on the large number of fanfic novels which trash the originals, much like how comic book publishers discard superhero universes and re-start from scratch.



SCIENCE FICTION

Writing For Pure Joy: A Panel Of Fan Fiction Writers

Erin Weir, Ashley Newell, Cordell Vos, Samantha Adkins

Sure, we all want fame and recognition, but can we put that to the side for an hour and talk about the pure joy of writing fan fiction? Be inspired by a variety of fan fiction writers as they share why they decided to write fan fiction, the process of diving into a beloved work, and the perks of being a fan fiction writer.

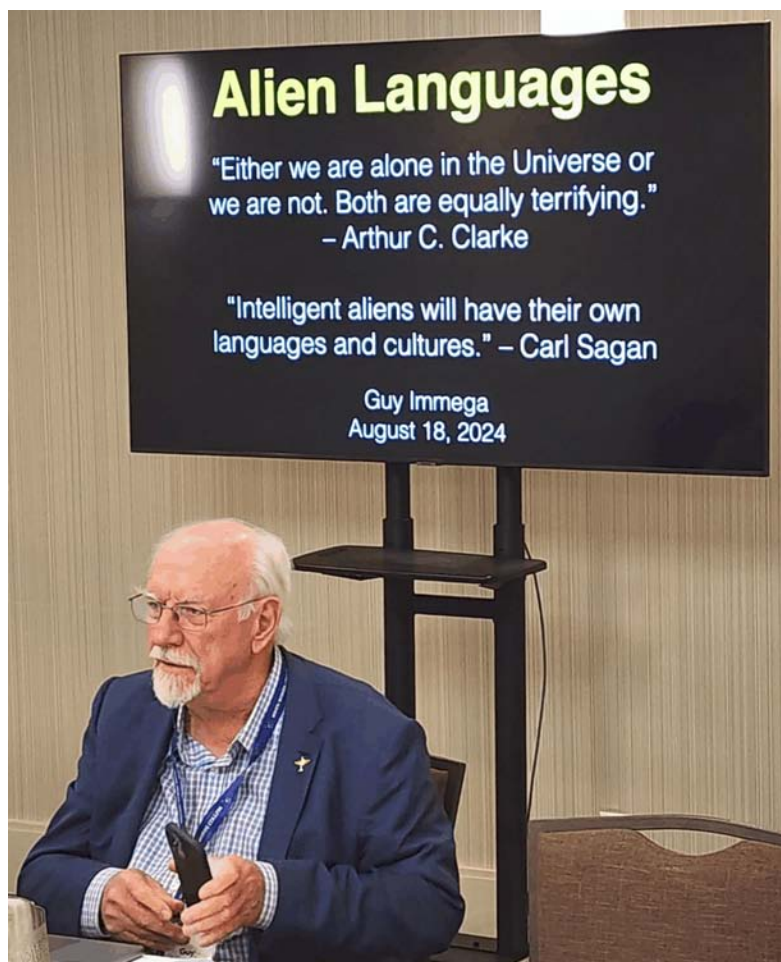
Alien Languages

Guy Immega

Animals make sophisticated calls but only humans and now AI chatbots! talk. No other creature on Earth, ape or bird, has mastered syntax: structured sentences with a subject, verb and object. Dinosaurs had over 200 million years to acquire language, but probably didn't. Did Neanderthals talk?

Today, 8.1 billion chattering humans are the masters of the planet. But what about sentient aliens? Could language evolve differently on one of the estimated 40 billion Earth-like habitable exoplanets in the Milky Way? Does speech need words? How does language shape culture?

A science fiction author Guy Immega (Super-Earth Mother, EDGE SFF 2023) examines some of the myriad possibilities, including radio and light languages. His talk will NOT be a lesson in Klingon or Chakobsa!



Most people are familiar with SETI searches such as the now-defunct Arecibo. METI is messaging to extraterrestrial intelligence, already done with radio telescopes and space probes Pioneer and Voyager. People fear METI might trigger malicious aliens.

No animal except *Homo sapiens* has syntax (sentence structure) in their languages. Neanderthals probably did not have syntax in their languages. Language needs big brains, a long adolescence for learning, and vocabulary plus syntax.

Language has a huge natural selection advantage that outweighs all other factors. That allowed the rapid spread and dominance of humans, who today have about 6,900 languages.

Birds can navigate by sensing magnetic fields and fish can generate electrical fields. Immega suggested a radio wave language that aliens might have, not continuous waves but the original spark-gap radios that existed during the first 25 years of the technology. Spark-gap clicking could evolve not only to words but could transmit images.

Creating Worlds

Rick Overwater, Bonnie Jacoby, Kevin Weir, Miji Campbell, Sarah Johnson

Join us for a panel discussion on the art and craft of world-building across different genres. This session is designed to explore the fundamental elements of world-building and what it means to seamlessly incorporate them into our writing.

Whether you're crafting a fantastical realm, a dystopian future, or a contemporary setting, the principles of world-building remain pivotal in bringing your story to life.



Overwater said then even if your literary world is not some exotic alien planet, you must still take care of the details, such as how a city is laid out and functions. A world has to fit its society, such as farming can only be done on certain classes of planets.

Jacoby said that instead of using infodumps to explain a world, let the characters discover the background details in their travels.

Campbell said her world building is more like world borrowing. She uses her girlhood memories and visits to Calgary Heritage Park.

ALTERNATIVE HISTORY

What Makes Alternate History So Appealing?

Susan Forest, D.G. Valdron, Precious de Leon, Sandra Fitzpatrick, David Worsick

Alternative histories date back to the time of Herodotus, and include many thought experiments such as Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell, The Plot Against America, and The Years of Rice and Salt. Panelists discuss the appeal of these works for both readers, and writers.



Valdron said he was interested in alternative history from childhood, when his elders who had served in the last war discussed how things might have been different. He grew up in a family of tradesmen who took things apart and put them back together again, and decided to do the same with history. Alternative history allows different viewpoints to be expressed that were never heard in our timeline.

Forest wondered how history would have been with more women recognized for their work. She mentioned an alternative history written as an academic paper complete with footnotes as a scholar in a parallel timeline explained why other timelines such as ours were too improbable.

Fitzpatrick wrote alternative history with the same visible events as in our timeline but with hidden history such as secret societies. She said a divergence producing a new timeline show be set far enough in the past to allow changes to be fully expressed.

If Napoleon Had A Pet Dragon

Amanda Witow

If you've ever wondered what would happen if Cleopatra was a mage, Genghis Khan had prophetic dreams, or Napoleon had a pet dragon, then you're on the cusp of a big decision.

Should your story be Alternative History or Historical Fantasy? What's the difference? And, how do you write for each? In this seminar, we'll explore some of the ways to mix history with fantasy.

The difference between historical fantasy and alternative history matters for marketing and reader expectations. Magic and supernatural make the story into fantasy, while alternative history must be plausible no matter how improbable.

Extrapolated divergences set off cascades. The longer in time the greater the cascade of new events. A common failing in both types is imposing modern beliefs on historical societies. Such people would not tolerate workers, Negroes, Jews, independent women, and so forth. The prejudices of yore must be taken into account, not replaced by enlightenment that didn't exist.



MYSTERY

How To Create Clues For Your Mystery

Juanita Rose Violini

Get the blueprint for clue creation. Learn the different forms of clues: Direct clues, which are physical and tangible or Indirect clues, which are intellectual and intangible.

Understand how to design clues that allows them to be visible yet elusive. Once you know the kind of clues to create and how to twist them, you still have to hide them in your story. They need to be overlooked or mistaken for a red herring. Clues that are well hidden in the twists and turns of a good mystery leave your readers in awe and wondering how they missed the solution.



Clues are needed for motive, method, opportunity, and relationships between characters. The writer needs a list of events in chronological order, another list of what happened from the characters' point of view, and the detective's interpretation. Clues have two parts: finding them and realizing what they mean.

FUN, JUST PLAIN FUN

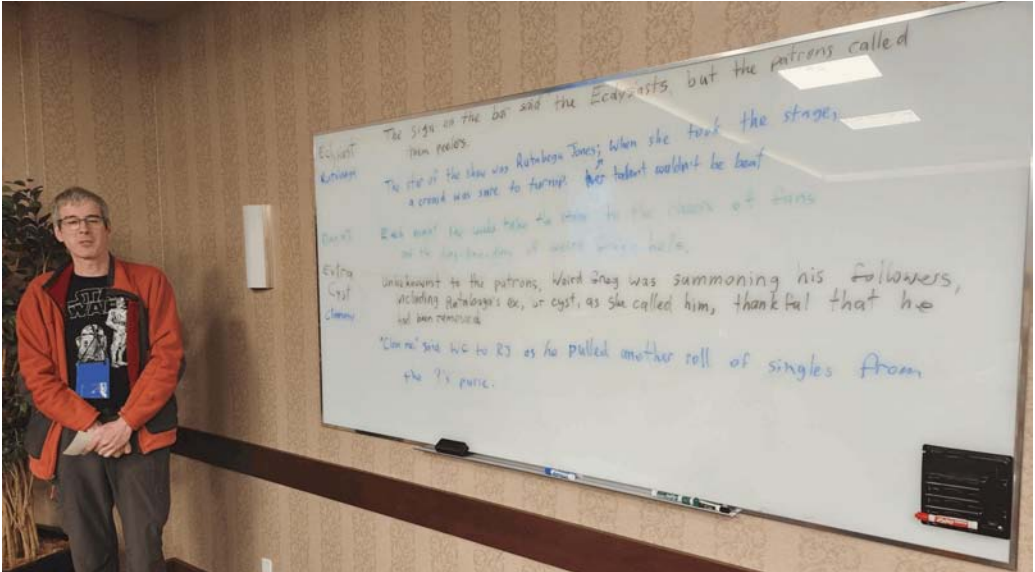
These were definitely non-serious events.

Writers At The Improv

Imaginative Fiction Writers Association, hosted by Renee Bennett

A perennial favourite audience participation game. Members of the audience suggest a word with which the panelists must each write a sentence using the word. Puns are expected. When time is called after two minutes, each panelist reads out aloud the sentence.

The audience then votes for their favourite, which becomes part of the text, written up on a whiteboard. A couple of paragraphs are compiled to produce a vignette that any editor would reject instantly.



You're Write About It

Kevin Weir, Erin Weir, Rob Bose, Jonathan Sean Lyster, Anthony Bidulka

A comedic panel show where host Kevin Weir quizzes local authors about their knowledge of niche facts from popular fiction.



Several categories of questions were asked to test the panelists knowledge of science fiction and fantasy. Firstly, straightforward questions were asked such as:

- Q. What did Chilton publish before it released the novel DUNE by Frank Herbert?
- A. Believe it or not, auto repair manuals.

Another game was called Localization. The compeer Kevin Weir took a paragraph from a well-known science fiction novel, then put in through Google Translate in a sequence of multiple languages and finally back to English. The panelists had to identify the original novel.

There was a spelling bee where the panelists had to spell exotic words from novels or movies. The toughest one was the Klingon's homeworld, whose name was transliterated into English as Kronos but was more correctly spelled as Qo'noS.

ADIEU

WWC 2024 ended all too soon. It seemed to be well run, at least from my point of view as an attendee not connected with the committee. I look forward to next year.

CONVENTIONAL FICTION: PART 18

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 17 appeared in OPUNTIA's #70.1A, 270, 285, 313, 364, 385, 398, 414, 421, 439, 459, 488, 495, 513, 523, 537, and 545.]

Convention Politics.

“How The GRINCH Stole Worldcon” by Bill Fesselmeyer (1975, available as a free download from fancylopedia.org/How_the_GRINCH_Stole_Worldcon) was written by a man who sat through one too many committee meetings of the Science Fiction Worldcon.

To say the bylaws and constitutions of Worldcons are convoluted is an understatement. Fesselmeyer wrote a not entirely fictional scenario where convention committees operated under different constitutions to alter the site selection votes for future Worldcons.

At the time the story was written, site selection ballots were by mail. Seeing what goes on today with electronic ballots doesn't necessarily make Fesselmeyer's story obsolete. Indeed, had the Chinese fans voted themselves another Worldcon at Chengdu, there would have been a storm of protest on social media, even though American fans have been doing it for decades.

I am very actively involved in organized philately. Unlike science fiction fandom, there is a 150-year-old structure of local clubs, national societies, and the Federation Internationale de Philatelie. The FIP sanctions all international shows, of which there are several each year scattered around the world. In this manner, a stamp collector can visit at least one show within reasonable traveling distance.

The international shows all have equal status with each other. If a stamp collector is miffed with China, he could instead attend a show in the Americas or Europe. There is no reason why North America could not have a Worldcon each year, and in the same year, Europe or Asia also have a Worldcon.

Please note that although the Hugos are awarded at Worldcons, they are not part of Worldcons proper. At international stamp shows, exhibitors can win gold medals, all of which are equal to each other.

General Conventions.

FICTION AFFLICTION (2020) by Max Parrott was set at a fantasy convention called Arcadia Con. The protagonist was Jasmine Moore, a pet psychic. Apparently she made a living. Other characters attending included her talking dog Luffy (yes, really), and friend Brandon (last name never given).

They gushed over great expectations about making friends with wonderful authors. (Pause for laughter from the audience.) I was surprised that they were able to check into their rooms at 06h00, unlike any hotel where I've stayed.

Florian Raumont was the star author at the convention, in his own mind at least. Roland Osville was his main competitor there, whose novels were said to be derivative of Raumont. The fans of both authors were there in numbers and ready to rumble.

And so to the authors panel. Raumont got the loudest cheers, while Osville came a distant second. The former was a grouch while the latter was a smooth talker.

Not long after, someone skewered Raumont with a sword, then dropped him off a catwalk above the ballroom. Jasmine had a vision and inserted herself into the investigation. She and Brandon gathered clues with complete disregard for rules of evidence.

Soon noticed was that Raumont's death was similar to a scene in one of his novels. Various other alarms and visions followed. Detecting was made difficult because if you are attacked by a knight in armour then there were thirty people at the convention dressed in armour who were suspects.

The hotel and its staff had me wondering. Bringing in a golden retriever (Luffy was careful never to speak in public) that was not a service dog seemed doubtful. However there are some hotels that welcome pets, so Luffy might be accepted.

What was far more difficult to believe was that Jasmine had little trouble obtaining lists of hotel guests and employees. She was able to view security camera videos and walk around in back corridors. The hotel management were complaisant about confidentiality.

The police seemed to be about but seldom doing the obvious. Having identified a prime suspect, Jasmine was most annoyed when he became the second murder victim. Luffy followed a scent from the body which led to Osville's room. His wife Sandra's perfume, possibly.

Whenever the plot required an idiot to help move it along, Jasmine was there. She had the final confrontation with the murderer. The motive was that Raumont had been plagiarizing Osville and the latter couldn't prove it. Sandra wanted direct action taken and with the help of blackmailed accessories did so. No word about whether or not the convention resumed.

The novel read sort of okay but the dialogue was a little too perky. Too many adjectives describing how people spoke or looked.

The hotel staff had no concept of confidentiality. When a strange woman named Jasmine asked for information about guests, she got it, but any real hotel staff giving out such information would soon be fired for cause.

Horror Conventions.

“Not On My Watch” by Henry Herz (2022, from the anthology LOLCRAFT, edited by Michael Cieslak) took place during Terror Con in Paris at the Hotel Hydra. As the protagonists eventually learned, the hotel was above the deep caverns where Dagon and Hydra slumbered.

Convention members were being sacrificed, the 25th of which would awaken the two Old Gods. The heroes, armed with a grimoire and a knife, were able to stifle the plot. So if you work convention operations, don't complain about the usual problems.

HAIR RAISING (2013) by Kevin J. Anderson was a novel in a humorous mystery series about Dan Chambeaux, a zombie private investigator in the Unnatural Quarter. His partner was Robin Dyer, a black woman who advocated for the rights of monsters.

His current case involved someone scalping werewolves. He also dealt with Linda Bullwer, who wrote detective novels under the pseudonym of Penny Dreadful. Her newly published book was about the detective agency Shamble and Die, more a roman a clef about Chambeaux and Dyer than a mystery.

The coroner Archibald Victor's hobby was body building. A la Baron Frankenstein, not Arnold Schwarzenegger. Chambeaux's investigations around town crossed paths with every type of clichéd Hollywood monster.

The Worldwide Horror Convention was in town at the Bates Hotel. Chambeaux and Dyer picked up some extra money selling autographs at a table. The publisher Howard Phillips Publishing was there to plug Bullwer's novel.

The reader can surmise the author has attended many science fiction conventions. Does this seem familiar? (from Chapter 22)

When I entered the hotel lobby, I was surrounded by a milling mixture of normal-looking humans, humans dressed in a variety of monster costumes, real monsters wearing normal street clothes, and reporters and TV crews covering the event. It took me a few minutes just to drink it all in.

Con attendees stood at tables, filling out registration forms and getting in line to pay for their badges. The queue for the Pre-Registered badges was long and disorganized, and the crowd was growing restless, particularly when it became apparent that the line for those not pre-registered was moving faster.

A wizard sat behind the Pre-Reg table. Apparently, he had used a crystal ball to arrange the badges and registration packets in the order he predicted the guests would arrive, instead of alphabetical order. Unfortunately, his spell was flawed.

Over at the Professionals registration table, a slimy tentacle-faced creature was holding his badge and arguing with the poor human volunteer in a burbling otherworldly voice. “My name is misspelled! Yov Shuggoleth has two Gs!” He slapped the badge down, waiting for it to be reprinted. He moaned, “I’ll bet it’s misspelled in the program book, too”.

Panels included: “*Alternatives To Brains: New Diet For The Undead*” and “*The Hairy Truth: What Every Horror Writer Needs To Know About Werewolves*”. Chambeaux attended the latter hoping for help in his investigation. There were two types of werewolves, the full-time Hairballs and the full-moon-only Monthlies. The two groups despised each other.

Another werewolf scalping occurred at the convention, interrupting the book signing session. Bullwer was miffed but Chambeaux wasn't perturbed. He was

tired of explaining to fans that he didn't write the *Shamble and Die* book. There were too many fans who crossed the boundary between the factual world and fiction. I'm glad that doesn't happen in real life.

The scalping investigation continued. Chambeaux criss-crossed the Unnatural Quarter, meeting various beasts that went bump in the night. The culprit was a mad scientist who needed specimens for his plan to cure baldness.

Mystery Get-Togethers And Dispatches.

A TRACE OF POISON (2022) by Colleen Cambridge (pseudonym of Colleen Gleason) was a novel about Phyllida Bright. She was housekeeper to Agatha Christie at Lisleigh, England.

The Detection Club (which really existed) helped organize a Murder Fete. Club members included Christie, G.K. Chesterton, and Dorothy L. Sayers, but the real detecting was done by Phyllida. At a cocktail reception of the fete, one of the drinks was flavoured with poison.

The question was whether the murderer was aiming for someone else and got the wrong person. Phyllida was hampered because the majority of suspects at the fete were experts in murder. Trying to be a Miss Marple in a sea of Marples was vexing.

The evidence was mostly contaminated or inadmissible but the killer blabbed all. She had ghost-written a successful mystery novel series and wanted recognition.

THE PAPER CAPER (2022) by Kate Carlisle (pseudonym of Kathleen Beaver) was a novel in a cozy series about Brooklyn Wainwright of San Francisco, California. She was a bookbinder and restoration specialist when not Marpleing.

Local billionaire Joseph Cabot sponsored the Mark Twain Festival. He asked Brooklyn to rebind a first edition of *THE PRINCE AND THE PAUPER* before an audience. Other events included a Jumping Frog Contest, Riverboat Casino Night, Paint A Fence With Tom Sawyer (for the kiddies), Mark Twain Look Alike Contest, and a cash prize of \$100,000.

The murder didn't occur until halfway through the novel when Hobson the butler died of poison. Death by poisoned paper, a proclamation for the event, with ink spiked by toxins. Touch and die, as Hobson did when he picked up the paper.

Serious alarms followed as the casualty toll increased. Joseph's trophy wife Ella was impatient for money and her mother Ingrid even more so. The denouement was complicated because both women had been busy killing or attempting to kill in order for Ella to inherit the estate.

Joseph managed to survive to the epilogue. There was no word on whether he would sponsor a Mark Twain festival next year.

Conventional Murders.

MURDER ON THE POET'S WALK (2022) by Ellery Adams (pseudonym of Jennifer Stanley) was the eighth novel in a cozy series about Jane Steward of Storyton Hall, Virginia. She operated a manor house hotel which specialized in literary conventions and murder. As a result, she was an experienced Miss Marple.

Besides the usual hassles of running the hotel, this time around she had to deal with a convention of fifty poets specializing in greeting card rhymes, plus her book club *The Cover Girls*, plus two young sons, plus a dotty granduncle.

The first corpse showed up at the end of Chapter 2. A woman, dressed in styles of yore, her corpse staged in a canoe beached on the lake where the Tennyson Trail came along the shore. The *Lady of Shalott*, in case you haven't read Tennyson's poem.

The deceased was identified as Gretchen West, a librarian attending the poetry conference. The event was sponsored by a greeting card company, which offered a big money prize for the best card poems, hence the fifty poets.

Security cameras were checked but were inconclusive. A side excursion, and it really was one, was a trip through one of the hotel's secret passages, newly found by Jane's sons. She was custodian of a secret library of rare manuscripts and books, where some of the alarms took place.

Jane did some gentle Marpleing in the Ian Fleming Lounge, loosening her guests' tongues with Poetry In Motion cocktails (passion fruit and lychee martinis.).

When it was time for the scavenger hunt, beginning in the Jane Austen Alcove, the rest of the family joined in the sleuthing, not to mention some plainclothes Deppity Dawgs. It became obvious to both Jane and the police that the culprit was very familiar with the manor, both the security cameras and the secret passageways.

The Robert Frost Apple Picking Tea Party featured Turkey, Gouda, And Apple Sandwiches, and Apple Upside-Down Cake among other appleish items. The event went well, other than a minor contretemps when some poets took exception to Jane's questions.

Later on, someone took exception to poet Connor Jensen, whose body was found floating in the pool of a folly. From there, a character in the background moved to the front. Professor Dodge Ashley was on the judging committee and confessed he accepted a bribe to make Jensen the winner. Ashley denied the murders though.

Meanwhile another background event moved to the fore. A villager had published a children's book about the adventures of Pig Newton. There really was a cute little pig which became a tourist attraction.

Then it became an Internet sensation, which brought a mob into the village. The police were overwhelmed, caught between that and the murder investigations. Several suspects ran hither and yon. The pig and the greeting card company were tied together. The chase stepped into high gear.

Meanwhile, the convention sailed on at Storyton Hall. Every convention has a banquet, and the Poetry of Food Feast was laid out on the tables. It was a buffet, with each table having food connected to a famous poet.

Having run out of any new suspects, the time came for the traditional confrontation in an isolated spot between Miss Marple and the murderer, then the last-second rescue. The epilogue had several twists, all of them based on passing mentions earlier in the novel. The threads all tied together nicely without any tomato surprises. And so to a happy ending, at least for those who survived or weren't in jail.

Cooking Up Crime.

BAKE OFFED (2022) by Maya Corrigan was the eighth novel in a food cozy series about Val Deniston and her grandfather Don Myer of Bayport, Maryland. She operated a café and did catering, while he wrote a recipes column.

Frederick County, at the other end of the state, was hosting the Maryland Mystery Fan Fest. The convention was block-booked in the Poe wing, both guest and function rooms. Edgar Allan Poe is big in Maryland, so the name of the wing wasn't just for the convention.

Events included a bake-off where each contestant had to assume the role of a cook to a fictional detective. Granddad was playing the part of Fritz Brenner, the cook for Nero Wolfe.

The problem was that Wolfe was a gourmet who ate elaborate foods, whereas Granddad was a five-ingredient cook. Fortunately a rummage in the attic brought forth a set of Wolfe recipe cards with which to work.

Those cards had been issued decades ago as publicity for a new Wolfe book and were now valuable collectibles, worth thousands as a complete set in the original packaging.

Arriving at the convention centre, Val and Granddad were met by Cynthia Sweet, his nemesis and rival cooking columnist. Her husband had died a month before but she seemed to have recovered. Since most wills have a 30-day survivorship clause, she was a day away from inheriting.

She was in the bake-off as Mrs Hudson. The third contestant was Dave Proctor, posing as Mervyn Bunter, the valet and cook of Lord Peter Wimsey. Proctor was a distant cousin of Cynthia and her only living blood relative.

At the bake-off, Granddad's contribution was sponge cake flavoured with assorted items including stout. I'm sure the pun was intended. After the bake-off, Granddad's recipe box was stolen. His misfortune was nothing compared to Cynthia, who was murdered in her hotel room. A valuable ring she owned was missing but most doubted the murder was done for that.

A year prior a man was murdered in his room under suspiciously similar circumstances. The hotel management were not happy. At the opening

ceremonies the next morning, an announcement was made that Cynthia had died but without mentioning the possibility of murder. The fannish rumour mill at the convention went into overdrive.

Val and Granddad were hampered by their volunteer work. Pinned to the registration desk out in the hallway greeting incomers, they couldn't do any sleuthing. Later they got free and Marpled about the convention.

Val was a moderator for several panels and had to break away from sleuthing at intervals to set up another panel. Since some of the panelists had a connection to the deceased or suspects, that task was actually helpful.

There were many suspects who didn't mourn Cynthia. She had sabotaged competitors at other bake-offs and usurped her stepdaughter from her father's estate. The inheritance would be complicated.

The next excitement was at the reception just before the masquerade. A glass of red wine didn't agree with one of Val's informants, a chatty fan appropriately nicknamed Birdie. She fell to the floor after a hearty swig. Not dead but in hospital.

The glass of wine, spiked with a sedative, had actually been poured for another attendee named Claire. By mistake the glass had been switched with Birdie's drink. Claire didn't seem to have any connection with anyone at the convention.

Fortunately the trivia contest went well without anyone dying. Val and Granddad use the score sheets to identify one suspect by her handwriting. Assorted alarums followed, with even more hypothesizing in excruciating detail about every possible suspect.

Every scenario that could be rehashed or speculated upon filled the pages. Val wrote out a timetable of who was where and when. Useful for the reader. The final list boiled down to two suspects. If Cynthia died just before midnight, the stepdaughter would inherit. If she died after midnight then Proctor would inherit.

There was the traditional confrontation of Miss Marple and the killer, in a hotel closet just after the convention auction. Since Val was booked for the series she survived the encounter. The convention wrapped up Sunday afternoon and so did the murder case.

Festivals.

MURDER AT THE BLUEBERRY FESTIVAL (2022) by Darci Hannah was the third novel in a food cozy series about Lindsey Bakewell of Beacon Harbor, Michigan. The village was on the shore of Lake Michigan. She operated a bakery and café. With a surname like hers, of course she did.

Twice August and the annual Blueberry Festival was nigh. Lindsey was on the organizing committee, in charge of the pie eating contest. As a professional baker she was disqualified from competing in the Bake-Off, so she helped out elsewhere.

There was trouble down at the festival. Someone was pranking people and events. Initially the pranks were taken as jokes but as they escalated the word 'sabotage' was used. When the body of a man was found in a boat, his murder changed everything.

Lindsey, assisted by her boyfriend Rory Campbell, not to mention the police, began investigating. She still had her other duties to perform, such as the café, which featured blueberry pie, blueberry-filled doughnuts, and blueberry muffins.

Integrated into the text between the troubles and strife were detailed explanations of Lindsey preparing food, not always with a blueberry theme. These were actual recipes written in prose form. As an example from Chapter 28, the plot suddenly stopped when Lindsey went into her kitchen:

"I preheated the oven to 350 degrees and took out a nine-by-thirteen-inch pan. Although I could have gone with a graham cracker crust, I decided to up the flavor and make a crust from store-bought Pecan Sandies instead."

"I put the whole pack in the food processor and ground them to a nice crumb. I then transferred the crumbs to a bowl and stirred in a third of a cup of melted butter. I then pressed the crumb mixture into the bottom of the pan and sent it into the oven for ten minutes."

"While the crust was cooling, I beat together a brick of cream cheese, a cup of powdered sugar, and an eight-ounce tub of Cool Whip. This common mixture, when spread over a cooled crust, tasted amazing!"

“However, to make it even more amazing, I took out a bowl of my blueberry pie filling (a store-bought can of blueberry pie filling would work just as well), stirred in a cup of fresh blueberries, then spread it over the cream cheese mixture.”

“I next sprinkled a cup of chopped pecans over the blueberries and topped the whole thing off with another layer of Cool Whip. That done, I covered it with plastic wrap and sent the Blueberry Delight into the refrigerator to chill. I was then ready to start on my next item, roasted new potatoes.”

I’ll spare you the potatoes recipe and subsequent items that went on for another full page. At times this wasn’t a mystery novel with recipes, it was a cookbook with a mystery story. I’m not really complaining. I like reading recipes even if I don’t actually use them.

Her mother Ellie was in charge of the festival’s fashion show. Lindsey was dragooned into walking down the runway, accompanied by her Newfoundland dog, named Wellington. He wore a blueberry-coloured raincoat, as if a water dog really needed one.

Rory was in charge of the Blueberry 5K race, which Lindsey had been talked into competing. Sabotaged, by changing the course markers. The Bake-Off likewise, by putting field mice into the pies.

Lindsey went into lockdown mode at the bakery for good reason, as she thought she would be the next target. She was wrong, as the body of Lars Jorgenson, dressed as a Viking, was found in a boat floating off shore.

He was the village eccentric but no more. He had been poisoned with belladonna berries mixed into a blueberry pie. He was then dressed as a Viking by the killer and launched out onto the lake. The murderer put a goat in the boat with the deceased so that the bleating of the distressed animal would attract attention.

In Chapter 18, a police sergeant noted that Jorgenson was the fourth body Lindsey had found. *“Before you came along, Bakewell, most of the deaths in this village were due to natural causes.”* However the police let Lindsey keep the goat as evidence.

The good news though, was that the pie eating contest went off without a hitch. From there, several chapters followed. Within each chapter, the text alternated

between sleuthing and detailed recipes of food Lindsey was preparing. The festival now over, she began baking Apple Gouda Bread, just to name one.

Jorgenson’s name kept coming up during the Marpleing, making Lindsey suspicious. That will also make the reader suspicious that he had nothing to do with the pranks. The obvious suspect never is the culprit. A character only mentioned once in a sentence in an early chapter will be the killer.

But I digress. About the halfway mark, someone finally asked the obvious question. Who had reason to sabotage the festival? Lindsey and the police had been choosing suspects and trying to fit evidence to them.

Next up was the traditional break-and-enter by Miss Marple in search of evidence. Jorgenson was dead, so Lindsey and her friends went to his house and began searching. They found a poisoned pie in the refrigerator and promptly dropped it on the floor. They carried on contaminating the evidence at the premises, decided on a new suspect, and then departed.

A second tranche of suspects was brought forth by Lindsey and company. One salient fact was that Jorgenson had been in the initial stages of Alzheimer’s disease. Lindsey, with some last-chapter evidence suddenly dug up by chance, identified the murderer.

She met him alone, which would be when the gunpoint confrontation would take place. However he was remorseful, and told her Jorgenson’s death was a mercy killing because of the disease. That still made the death a premeditated murder, not assisted suicide, because Jorgenson never knew he was eating a poisoned pie.

The murderer admitted to the pranks for complicated reasons based on what happened at the first Blueberry Festival in 1972. In the epilogue, once the story became public, sales of blueberry pies soared at the bakery. Hopefully next year the Blueberry Festival would go smoothly.

The recipes appendix began with Blueberry Lemon Bread, then Blueberry Summer Salad, Blueberry Muffins, Blueberry Buckle (crumble cake), Blueberry Delight (a repeat of the aforementioned recipe from Chapter 28), Blueberry Pie (of course), and to wash all that down, Blueberry Mint Julep.

Fatal Fetes.

DEATH COMES TO THE FAIR (2016) by Catherine Lloyd (pseudonym of Catherine Duggan) was set in the English village of Kurland St. Mary in 1817. Lucy Harrington and Major Sir Robert Kurland were about to be married.

Their wedding was delayed when the church verger Ezekial Thurrock was crushed to death after a gargoyle fell off the bell tower. The village fete had just concluded and there were mutterings about how Thurrock happened to win so many prizes in the vegetables competition.

More than a few villagers grumbled that the fix was in. The situation was not entirely comical because considerable side bets had been wagered on the outcomes. Lucy and Robert found themselves in the centre of the controversy.

A second Thurrock then passed to the next world before time, making evident that the deaths were not about vegetables. The old families that participated in the fair had old feuds. Lucy and Robert had to sort through quite a lot of history before finding the culprit.

The killer wasn't concerned about old family history as she was about current events, namely inheritance. She didn't get what she thought was hers but did get what she deserved. Lucy and Robert finally got their wedding.

CRIME AND CHERRY PITS (2024) by Amanda Flower was the fourth novel in a cozy series about Shiloh Bellamy of Cherry Glen, on the shore of Lake Michigan. She operated a cherry orchard and had a booth in the National Cherry Festival at nearby Traverse City.

Life was not a bowl of cherries for Shiloh because she was involved in a dispute with her cousin Stacey over a family inheritance. Additionally Shiloh was not on good terms with her neighbour farmer Tanner Birchwood, nor her father, with whom she had financial issues.

Stacey soon had a more serious problem. She had a nasty and public breakup with her latest boyfriend Dane Fulbright, right in front of Shiloh's festival booth. That attracted a crowd, which boosted sales at the booth after Stacey and Dane departed in opposite directions. It's an ill wind that blows no good.

Stacey had learned that Dane was married. Fast forward to the cherry pit spitting contest when someone supplied Dane with a poisoned cherry. His wife Lily became a widow and Stacey became the prime suspect.

This being her fourth suspicious death involvement, Shiloh had a reputation around the village as a Miss Marple. Despite their tense relations, Stacey wanted her cousin to find the murderer.

Shiloh barged about the village just ahead of the Deppity Dawgs. They were not happy at her running interference in their case. She quickly accumulated a list of suspects. Whenever an idiot was needed for an idiot sub-plot, she was there.

Dane was a womanizer and had more than one on the side. He also ran fake fundraisers that bilked many local residents. He and Lily were just beginning a divorce action.

The festival booth and the orchard had their own work and vexations to keep Shiloh busy. The alarums and bad blood accumulated. She baked cherry tarts and treats late into the night for her booth.

Notwithstanding previous events, the cherry pit spitting contest resumed with the Women Under 30 category. At this point I stopped reading and did some Googling. By golly, there really are cherry pit spitting contests around the world, and yes, they are subdivided into classes by age and gender. All knowledge is contained in cozies, if I may borrow a phrase from zinedom.

Shiloh had two final confrontations with the killer. He had murdered Dane over personal matters, then went after her because she kept snooping. The final battle was at the festival but there were several police officers nearby. Within spitting distance, pardon the expression.