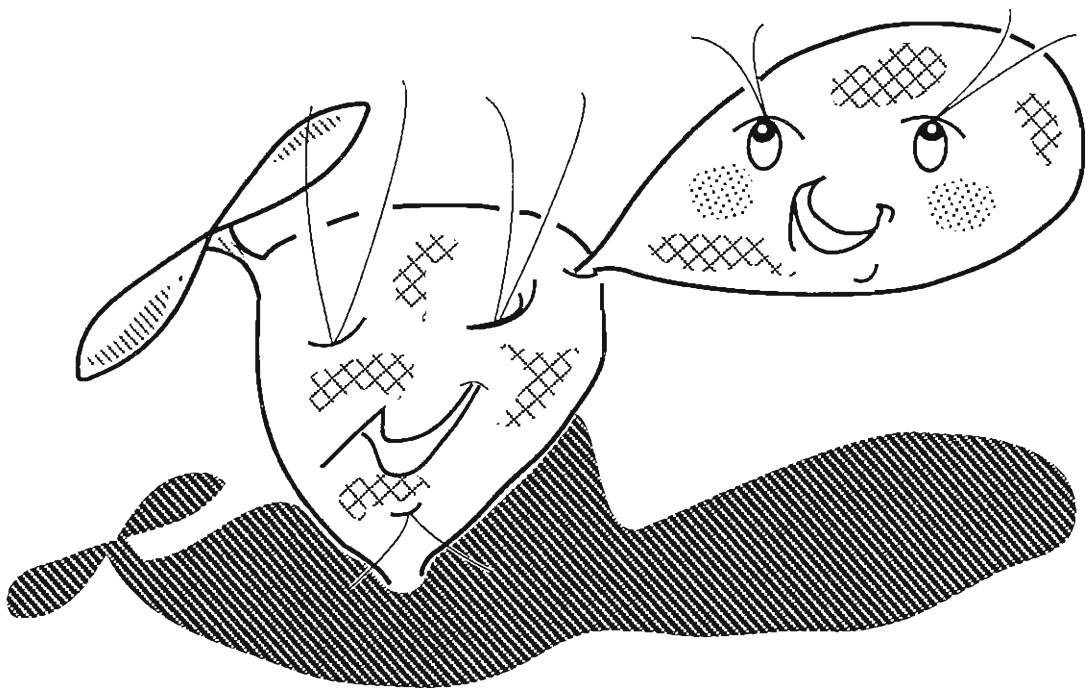


# OPUNTIA

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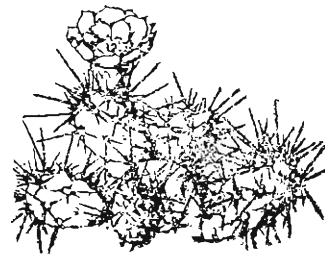
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Whole-numbered OPUNTIA's are sercon, x.1 issues are reviewzines, x.2 issues are indexes, and x.5 issues are perzines.

**COVER ART CREDIT:** Sheryl Birkhead, 125509 Jonnie Court, Gaithersburg, Maryland 20882

**I ALSO HEARD FROM:** John Held Jr, Eric Lindsay, Jae Leslie Adams, Carolyn Clowes, Rodney Leighton, Tiziana Baracchi, Henry Welch, Kathy Chamberlin, Peter Netmail, Diane Bertrand, Ned Brooks, Chester Cuthbert, Scott Crow, Brant Kresovich, Steve Jeffery, Guy Miller, Sheryl Birkhead, Teddy Harvia, Randall Fleming

**LETTERS  
TO THE  
EDITOR**  
[Editor's  
remarks  
in square  
brackets]



FROM: Joseph Nicholas  
15 Jansons Road  
Tottenham, London N15 4JU, England

2002-08-31

One question that intrigues me about your account of your mother's death (and I hope this isn't too inquisitive) is why did the RCMP patrolman want to take your mother's prescription medicines away? Is there something in Canadian law which requires the confiscation and disposal of medicines being taken by the deceased, and if so why?

[He took the prescriptions for the Medical Examiner, who is called in to investigate all unattended deaths such as my mother's. The prescription labels have the doctors' names on them, with whom he could verify her condition and probable cause of death. In this case, it was obvious that my mother had died of congestive heart disease, so no autopsy was needed. After the funeral, the

M.E. passed them on to the mortician, who returned them to me. I then took them to her pharmacist, who arranged for the safe disposal of the medicines under hazmat laws.]

One does not really want to dwell too much on the business of drawing up a will. We've bought a do-it-yourself guide and the forms which go with it, but that was last February and we still haven't got around to opening the package and reading the contents. I guess it's just the usual reluctance to confront the fact of one's inevitable mortality. Intellectually, I know that we're all going to die sometime, but emotionally it's a rather difficult subject to deal with.

[True enough, but it must be faced. If you and Judith are killed simultaneously in a car accident, your wills provide direction to the executor about what is to be done with your estate. Perhaps you intended to leave it all to some charity, but in the absence of a will, the courts may give it to that relative you despised.]

Changing the subject, to the issue of the policing of the protests at the Kananaskis G-8 Summit, I should imagine that despite the temperatures they had to endure, the police were probably grateful for the overtime payments they racked up. I noticed something similar with the May Day "Carnival Against Capitalism" protests in London earlier this year. By comparison with last year's, they were a complete damp squib, but because it was felt that last

year's protests had been insufficiently policed, the streets this year were swamped with officers. And very often just sitting around waiting for something to happen. From our desks on the fourth floor, we could look down on clumps of police doing nothing beyond passing the time of day reading newspapers, playing cards, and so forth. As a potential target of protestors (we were in a government building), we were grateful to have them there, but as individual taxpayers, well ...

[They also serve who only stand and wait. I've found as a municipal Trouble Calls Supervisor that taxpayers may grumble about the high cost of government services, but they will forgive it as long as we provide rapid response for disasters or riots.]

FROM: Judith Hanna 2002-08-18  
15 Jansons Road  
Tottenham, London N15 4JU, England

Hadn't realized that you too were a member of deaf fandom. Yes, the world remains far too noisy even with most of the high frequencies gone missing. Like you, for years I found that hearing aids were some use for the limited situation of quiet voices against quiet backgrounds but amplified background noise painfully, and were uncomfortable to wear. For several years, I decided that it

just wasn't worth bothering to replace the last one I mislaid. When it came to looking for a new one, I thought I'd better see what new stage bionic ears had reached. Digital aids are now available on the NHS, and do make a difference. The tests weren't just the usual pitch/volume response, but also checked hearing of tones against background noises, and volume level at which sound became painful. Consequently I now have an aid that I do actually use, and have so far managed not to mislay. But people still mumble.

FROM: Ken Faig Jr 2002-08-31  
2311 Swainwood Drive  
Glenview, Illinois 60025-2741

Just a note to express my condolences on the loss of your mother. We discovered my late father-in-law under similar circumstances this past winter. He had died at home just as he wished. I think he had just taken his mail from the mailbox and was sitting on his sofa opening it, when he had a fatal stroke. My wife had spoken to him that morning, and when he did not return calls that afternoon, we drove down in the evening, to find him deceased. Like your mother's, his body was cool and rigor mortis was only beginning. As in your case, the police officer took us into the kitchen to answer questions while the paramedics did their checking. One doesn't encounter death too frequently in our

culture. I think natural death is sometimes gentle for older people.

[One thing I now know is that a dead body looks nothing like those depicted on television and movies, nor like a deceased reposing in a coffin at the funeral after the mortician has beautified the body a bit. Cremation is our family tradition, so the image of her as I found her body is the one I retain.]

FROM: Mark Plummer 2002-07-19  
14 Northway Road  
Croydon, Surrey CR0 6JE, England

[Re: Queen Mum's death.] Claire and I were at the Eastercon on Jersey in the Channel Islands when we heard the news that the Queen Mother had died. The venue, the Hotel de France, is a big sprawling place which has been generally popular with fans since it first hosted a convention in 1989. Part of the attraction is the shop with its range of homemade chocolates. The shop also carries a range of the usual sort of tourist-oriented gifts, and these include a selection of desktop flags. The morning after the news of the death was released, an employee of the gift shop had dutifully, or perhaps ironically, lowered all these flags to half-mast.

FROM: Harry Warner Jr  
Hagerstown, Maryland

2002-09-01

that all the time? I've lived beside a couple of major freight train lines in my time, and some cars are perambulating art galleries, if you consider graffiti as art.

[Harry died February 2003. His will could not be found immediately after his death and the house had to be searched. He had said he wanted to leave his zine collection to an institution but his will left everything to his church. A letter with the will specifying disbursement of the zines had no legal standing and the zines therefore belong to the church. At last report the church was trying to sell the zines for a ridiculous amount.]

[Presumably the Summit brought in a batch of extra railway police to guard the downtown freight lines (there is no passenger service through Calgary) and the graffiti taggers weren't paying enough attention to their surroundings. They say the strongest security in a bank is just after they've been robbed.]

[Re: making a will] Most of your advice about preparing for one's sudden death is good but I disagree on a few particulars. If a person puts into writing where can easily be found certain details, there could be bad consequences from a burglary of the house. The safe deposit box key, for instance; an intruder might decide to get to it before the executors. He could probably find your signature somewhere and practice copying it.

Protestors have a tendency to look a little silly in the press, even if that's never their intention. Just like fans at a convention. I'm waiting for an entrepreneur to offer these groups a course on how to use the press for their own ends. I'm sure the course may already exist, but I wonder how these groups would look if they'd already taken it. They might be organized, semi-efficient, and well-spoken, and they'd gather regularly to make speeches. Sounds more like a political party, doesn't it? That's why politicians don't get along well with demonstrators; they're afraid of the competition.

FROM: Lloyd Penney  
1706 - 24 Eva Road  
Etobicoke, Ontario M9C 2B2

2002-09-10

[I think the main problem is that there are too many groups in modern protests, each shouting for their cause. The result is a cacophony to the general public.]

[Re: Calgary G-8 Summit] If the railway police arrested two protestors for spraying graffiti onto train cars, why can't they do

## ROCKY MOUNTAIN HIGHS.

by Dale Speirs

### The Town Of Other Days.

2002-07-24

Today I decided to walk up the Cascade River from the ghost town of Bankhead. On reading the map in the parking lot, I changed my mind as it was 5 km to the river from that point. In the opposite direction from the parking lot was shown a trail that led to the extinct coal-mining village of Bankhead and thence to a cirque on Cascade Mountain. I mis-read the map; it said 4.3 km to the cirque but I thought it referred to the mountain top and the cirque was much closer. And so up the slopes.

Bankhead thrived in the days when coal was king, supplying the nearby town of Banff and the steam engines of the trans-continental railway that goes through the Bow River valley. Alas, Banff converted to natural gas heating and the railways converted to diesel engines. Most of the Bankhead houses were moved to the Banff townsite, ironically by steam tractor. What remained was stripped into components for re-use elsewhere, and today only a few concrete shells are left. Spruces and shrubs grow through the floors, and the shells are roofed by the perpetual gloom of coniferous forest. The graffiti on the walls were not spray paint or scratched in, they were scribbled with lumps of coal lying about the forest floor.

## The Scale Of Eternity.

-6-

John Diefenbaker (Canada's Prime Minister from 1956 to 1963) once remarked that he never truly understood the meaning of the word 'eternity' until he had to listen to the House of Commons debate the price of wheat. For me, eternity is walking up the endless switchbacks of the Bankhead trail to the Cascade cirque. One reason why I don't go into the back country in the Rockies is that I learned a long time ago that most of the trails go through spruce forest, with only occasional viewpoints along the way. Bankhead was like that. Seen one patch of spruce trees, you've seen them all. By the time I realized what I was in for, it was too late to turn back; I might as well finish the job.

I did go up the trails a bit faster than I would have otherwise because of the mosquitoes. Spruce forests are not only boring, but also silent and calm. The carbon dioxide I exhaled floated along with me as I puffed my way up the never-ending trail. This was a siren call to every mosquito and blackfly on that side of the mountain. I jogged as fast as I could to evade them, given that I was going up a 50% or steeper grade at times (and a long and painful death to the forest ranger who marked that trail). When my lungs and heart could no longer stand it, I paused and vigorously fanned myself with my cowboy hat to keep the insect hordes away, all the while sounding like a Bankhead steam engine moving a house.

## Upon A Peak In Cascade.

The trail finally leveled off, then turned around a curve onto a moraine at the base of the cirque. (A moraine is a ridge of boulders and gravel that marked the front of the glacier at its last advance before finally retreating.) The cirque had no glacier but the rock walls were more impressive because the cirque was so small. I had to lean my head back nearly horizontal to see the top of the mountain, like standing at the base of a skyscraper and trying to see the roofline. There was a middle-aged couple already resting at the top of the moraine. Normally, hikers try to give each other space, but the moraine was too small for us to ignore the other. We nodded hello and I tried a jest, "Worth visiting once, but not twice!". They replied it was their second trip up to the cirque. Oops. However, she went on to mention that their previous trip had been thirteen years ago. Well, once every thirteen years is not too often.

Having spent two hours climbing up the trail, I was determined to get my time's worth, so I bid the couple adieu and started up the talus slope. The talus was sorted by size, with minivan boulders at the base where the moraine finally stopped them, then desk-sized, then breadbox size, and so on up to the fine gravel at the base of the cirque walls. Three other tourists were sitting at the line where the minivan boulders gave way to desk boulders. I worked my way around them, but they waved me over and

pointed to a hoary marmot a few metres from them. The marmot was busy licking a dolomite boulder, presumably for some salt. I observed it for a while, but having watched cattle at a salt lick back on the farm, I felt I had little to learn in this instance. I continued up the talus into the cool wind. Finding a boulder with a view of the valley below, I sat down to rest.

I was appalled to note I was only about one-quarter of the way up Cascade Mountain after all that work. The Trans-Canada Highway far below looked like two strips of thin wire. I turned around and looked up the rock walls. No, not today to climb them. Next time I rent a helicopter.

Golden-mantled squirrels were everywhere in the boulders. They were totally fearless of humans. As I sat there, a few of them scrambled over to sniff my cowboy boots. Although the boots were covered with dust, the scent of the black shoe polish underneath seemed to discourage the squirrels. The squirrel's scale of life is the boulder field and adjacent forest in which they scavenge and breed. They could not see the valley far below, or conceptualize the mountain top far above. My scale of vision could change, but their's would always be this tiny corner of the world. On most of the bigger boulders, previous hikers had built inukshuks. This is a new fad sweeping Canada, and certainly less damaging to the environment than spraying graffiti. Inukshuks

are cairns used by the Inuit as guides on the featureless Arctic tundra. They are built of rock slabs stacked in the rough shape of a human, with legs and arms. They are so much a symbol of the Inuit that the Nunavut flag bears one as its main symbol. Before Nunavut joined Confederation in 1999, few Canadians had heard of them. Now homeowners have them by the front walk instead of a gnome or jockey holding up a hitching ring. Inukshuks seem to be displacing the maple leaf as a symbol of Canada. After the deaths of the Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan in 2002, the survivors memorialized them by erecting an inukshuk.

**The Scale Of Descent.**

One thing about mountaineering is that it is often harder to go down the slope than up. Climbing up, you lean forward and your centre of gravity is over the slope, not over thin air, and you have good traction. Coming down, one must lean backwards, or, more safely, crabwalk down the slope sideways. The Bankhead trail wasn't as bad as that, save in the places where Mr. Forest Ranger marked those insane grades. But going down a steep path is hard on the leg muscles, especially a pestilent trail that goes on forever.

Finally into the parking lot and my car. After chugging down a litre of water in about three seconds, I turned and looked back up the mountain. Did I climb that? It was one of those things that if one had known ahead of time ...

All that exercise made me hungry, so I drove into Banff for a bite to eat. Banff is a full-blown tourist trap. I went into an air-conditioned shopping mall and visited the Food Court. Exactly like the Food Court in your local mall, no matter where you live. The cool air was most gratifying. I sat down with my fast food, and noticed that in the centre of the Food Court was an ornamental fireplace, burning natural gas. The heat from the fireplace could be seen shimmering where it met the air-conditioned atmosphere.

**THE GREAT MOUSE HUNT OF 2003**

by Dale Speirs

**Prelude.**

2003-08-12

I was sitting on the edge of my bed getting dressed when I thought I saw movement along the baseboard. I turned to look but there was nothing. I shrugged it off as a floater (inclusion in the eyeball fluid) mis-interpreted by my peripheral vision as a mouse. Whatever other problems I've had with this house, mice have not been among them.

There are no rats in Alberta, but mice fill the ecological vacuum nicely. Cute little buggers but they do carry hantavirus and crap all over the place.



## The Battle Of The Snap Traps.

2003-08-19

The basement of my house used to be a rental suite at one time. I put my bedroom downstairs because it is cool in the summer and warm in the winter, while upstairs is usually the same temperature as the outdoors. (In other words, an older house that needs more insulation.) The suite is L-shaped, with the bedroom at the cul-de-sac. At the bend of the L is what was formerly the living room but is now my den, occupied mostly by my computer table and a bunch of sansevierias. Next to that is the kitchen, bathroom, and entrance to the suite. The kitchen is now the fishroom and workshop.

It was the day after Con-Version 20, Calgary's annual science fiction convention. I was sitting at the computer typing up my convention report when again my peripheral vision picked up movement. I turned to look and this time saw a mouse scurrying across the fishroom floor on its way out the entrance and into the undeveloped part of the basement. Very well then, it shall not see another sunrise. It being my day off, I made my usual rounds to the post office and supermarket, but with an additional stop at the hardware store to pick up a package of snap traps. We use these in our depots at work, the ones which don't have office cats, and they are very effective when smeared with peanut butter. I don't like poison because the animal goes off and dies someplace else, and one is never certain of success. If the mouse dies inside a

house wall, it also may stink up the house and the corpse attract the wrong sort of insect life into one's premises. A trap gives positive confirmation, and the unlamented deceased mouse can then be tossed into the backyard compost pile.

Going down the supermarket aisles, I noticed the only peanut butter jars they had were family size, for \$4, twice what I paid for the traps. Since I don't normally eat peanut butter, I didn't want to pay that much for something I would only use a dab of. However, in the snack crackers section I found packaged crackers and peanut butter for only \$1.99, and I could at least eat the crackers. So that was alright then.

I set up two traps, one along the fishroom wall and one behind the washing machine, which sits beside the entrance door to the suite. I calculated, correctly as it turned out, that the mouse was only foraging in the suite, which is too tidy for it to nest in. As it left the suite, its logical move would be to turn and scoot behind the washer into the cluttered part of the undeveloped basement.

## Opening Shots, Or, The Mouse Gets Its Licks In.

2003-08-20

My calculation was proven correct the next morning, as the fishroom trap was undisturbed. Unfortunately I was up against a

smart mouse, as the washer trap had been licked clean of peanut butter without springing it. Perhaps I hadn't set the spring properly, so I re-loaded the trap and made it more sensitive to movement. I was out of the house most of the day, and on my return immediately rushed downstairs to see if the mouse had been there. It had, and had licked both traps clean without springing them.

This was a personal affront to me. I am a professional horticulturist with a B.Sc. in the subject, journeyman landscape gardener papers, and, more relevant, a licensed and certified pest control technician with provincial authority to kill anything other than humans and children. I could not learnedly pontificate to citizens about spruce aphids or rodent control if my own house was an R&R centre for mice.

I stuck a small piece of cucumber slice under the trap triggers and smeared the traps liberally with peanut butter, then set the traps at right angles to each other so the mouse would have to step on one to reach the other. The traps were placed by the door frame of the bathroom, where the mouse would inevitably travel. My belief was that the mouse would be overconfident, having eaten so much peanut butter from the traps and would now be assuming they were harmless wood and wire. And so to bed.

### **Dunkirk In My Basement.**

2003-08-21

A new morning and a new day begun. I hobbled from my bed to the bathroom (I'm not at my best first thing in the morning). I stepped on a piece of dried cucumber. One trap had been sprung, and both were licked clean of peanut butter. Besides the dried-up cucumber slices, there were mouse scats on the floor, distinctly the colour of peanut butter.

Since the mouse now knew that traps were dangerous, I had to switch to a different style. It did, however, know that peanut butter was a healthy lifestyle food choice. Back to the hardware store, where I chose a teeter-totter style of trap. This was a square-sided, black plastic tube, bent in the middle. At the far end of the trap is where one places the bait, and when the mouse goes inside, it tilts the trap and slams the door shut. Price \$3.19 plus GST. Once more with feelings, not to mention \$7 and counting, plus gas money, for no results to date.

### **The Tables (And Trap) Turn.**

I placed the trap behind the washer, suitably baited with peanut butter. And finally, success! I came by a few hours later and noticed the trap twisted round from how it had been left. The trap

was so light when I picked it up that I wasn't certain I had caught something, but when I held it close to my ear, I could hear the sound of the mouse's feet scrabbling on the plastic.

The instructions suggested the mouse could be disposed of outside, but I didn't want it to find its way back into the house. I therefore set the live trap in my freezer for the mouse to humanely freeze to death.

**Epilogue.** 2003-08-22

Home from work this evening, and among other things I took the tip trap out of the freezer compartment. I went out on the front steps and carefully opened the trap, shaking out a freeze-dried mouse. It was my first good look at the enemy, much like a soldier seeing his first P.O.W. in a war. The mouse was crouched down on all fours, its tail wrapped around to the front, looking so lifelike that only the clouded eyes gave proof it was dead. That, plus when I picked it up by the tail, it was stiff as a board.

I tossed it to the far corner of my front yard, where the neighbourhood cats like to snooze (my yard is the only one in several blocks that is free of dogs and small children, so the local felines are frequent visitors). If a cat doesn't get it, no doubt a passing magpie will. Sic transit gloria SQUEAK!, with apologies to Mr. Pratchett.

## **CON-VERSION 20**

by Dale Speirs

Calgary's annual science fiction convention returned in 2003 to one of its original locations, the Westin Hotel in the downtown core on the edge of Chinatown. Guests of Honour were Terry Brooks, Robert J. Sawyer, Esther Friesner, and D.C. Fontana. The event was held August 15 to 17, at the height of the forest fire season.

Calgarians normally brag about how clear the air is and how crisp and blue the adjacent Rocky Mountains are. Those of us who live in the southwest part of the city had been instead reduced to muttering as we swept the ashfall off our cars. My two bright red Honda Civics had been converted to a deep pink colour the day before the convention by the ash fallout of the Crowsnest Pass, Mount Joffre, and Banff National Park fires burning in the mountains to the southwest of Calgary. Spectacular sunsets though, even if one couldn't even see the outline of the mountains.

### **A Rough Start.**

This complaint proved to be trivial, as the day before the convention began southern Ontario was blacked out from Windsor to Ottawa by a massive power failure originating across the border

in Ohio. Calgary International Airport discontinued all flights to and from southern Ontario, and the Premier of that province declared a state of emergency. Air Canada's back-up flight planning centre promptly failed (the diesel generator ran out of fuel), and even though other airlines were flying, Air Canada had to cancel all its flights worldwide because its central control was gone.

My immediate thoughts: a) Were Lloyd and Yvonne Penney (of Toronto) in the elevator on the way to their 17th floor apartment when the power went off?, and b) How many Con-Version Guests of Honour were stuck in airports?

I needn't have worried. After getting through the registration line, the first person I recognized was SF author Robert Sawyer of Toronto. He told me he had been in town for several days already for a writers' workshop and so had missed the blackout. His wife Carolyn Clink had not, but she was flying out on Westjet. At the opening ceremonies, all the guests were there, so that was one less worry.

When I first arrived at the Westin Hotel, the registration line was very long, which surprised me because in past years those such as I who had preregistered could breeze in and get our badge and goodie bag in thirty seconds. This year, preregistered and those buying memberships at the door were in the same linup, slowing

it down considerably. There are a few steps up from the hotel lobby to the convention concourse, and those in line were timing how long it took for the line to move past the steps. It was two minutes per step.

After several people, myself included, suggested to passing volunteers that a separate line be opened for preregisters, it was finally done. However, the new line only moved marginally faster than the at-the-door registration line, because the badges were filed numerically by membership number, not by name. The staff had a database on a laptop to check the names and cross-reference the badge number. Computers, of course, slow things down.

All was explained after I got my goodie bag and read the programme book while waiting for the opening ceremonies to start. The Chairwoman's report explained that "*... we had a bit of an upheaval in March, and we ended up getting an almost all-new convention committee.*" Another case for Canfandom historian Garth Spencer to add to his "Those Who Will Not Learn From History" file. The convention badges had no graphics but were just the convention name, member name, and membership number in Ariel font. Easy to run off fake badges at home, should one be so inclined. The Friday night programming was delayed a half hour all the way down the schedule due to the lineups, but other than that, things seemed to go well after the rough start. In the rest of the convention, I failed to notice anything untoward.

Anime Alberta played a DVD at the opening ceremony to honour the guests. Normally I cringe at homemade videos but this was quite well done, with an hilarious detoured Star Trek: TNG clip at the end that left the audience rolling in the aisles.

### **Magazines And The World Wide Web.**

The first panel I attended was ostensibly about the impact of the Internet on SF publishing, but soon drifted off into a discussion about editing. Amber Van Dyk and Chelsea Polk represented a magazine I had never heard of, IDEOMANCER, and Karl and Stephanie Johansen represented a new start-up called NEO-OPIS. Van Dyk said that ad-supported fiction Websites are not viable economically. She said that fiction submissions should be in legible typefaces, and that Courier is still the preferred standard in publishing because it is non-proportional and goes with any text system. At this point Karl interjected that his favourite typeface for submissions was Wingdings, although he wondered why he never seemed to get any replies.

Polk mentioned a problem that print magazines don't have, in that Websites can cut off customers who don't have the latest software or fast broadband connections (Flash was mentioned as the main culprit). She said she lost an argument with the company Webmaster who refused to make the IDEOMANCER Website backwards compatible with older versions of browsers or other

software. He felt it was the customer's responsibility to upgrade continuously in order to access the site. I had to wonder if he had taken any marketing courses.

There was discussion about standards to qualify for membership in SFFWA, SF Canada, and other authors' leagues. These organizations have minimum standards such as three professional sales, but there is strong prejudice against sales to Websites.

### **From The Titanic To Columbia.**

Subtitled "An Economy Of Disaster", this was a talk by Roy Brander, a municipal waterworks engineer. He started off by saying that this panel, held opposite one by Terry Brooks, was for people who get vaguely ill at the sight of a unicorn. He reviewed the trend of disasters over time, rather than just providing a capsule history of wrecks and explosions. Brander noted that attitudes to technology have not changed over time, whether it was cutting-edge steamships or spacecraft. Each generation makes the same mistakes once the previous generation is no longer around to constrain them.

These mistakes include:

- failure to imagine all reasonable scenarios
- lack of defence in depth (multiple redundancy) such as double hulls in steamships

- complaints by contractors about government regulations (such as passenger jet maintenance)
- industries always come to dominate the agencies that regulate them
- society only acts after many major fatalities
- hold costs down at the expense of safety

All of these result in normalization of deviation from standards. This is caused by managers shaving safety margins without any problems, so the reduced margin of error becomes the new standard. The cycle is repeated until the margins pass into a catastrophe, such as unseated O-rings in space shuttles (before Challenger, they were not considered a problem even though the original design specifications said no unseated rings). Foam had fallen off shuttle boosters many times before Columbia, so why hold the manufacturer liable if nothing happened? Easier to re-write the standards.

**Writers At The Improv.**

The Imaginative Fiction Writers Association is a Calgary writing workshop group that brings loads of fun each year to Con-Version. I always look forward to this panel. Their improv session pits three pairs of writers against the audience. It starts off by someone suggesting a word from the audience, which the writers have one minute to incorporate into a sentence. When

time is called, the sentences are read off and the audience votes on the best one. The process is repeated and a story of sorts is built up. This year's story follows; the underlined words are the ones suggested by the audience.

“Fergo woke from his third blackout of the day to find himself lying in a pool of something sticky and green. He looked up into the soulful brown eyes of a huge walrus. “Pardon me”, the walrus said. “I really should lay off the fermented blubber shakes”. Fargo groaned. He’d woken up after accidental prestidigitation, ironing his fingers, and the day was just getting worse. A platypus at the nearest table leaned across to his companion, a narwhal, and said, “What’s his kind doing in an Aquatic Animal Bar?”

Suddenly a wallaby burst through the double doors, screeching “Aquatic animal bars discriminate against marsupials! You could fill a Mint [*actual word suggested was 'filament'*] with the money they’re using to keep us out.!”

“Of corset could all be in my head”, the wallaby said, wide-eyed as the aquatic mammals rose as one and turned toward him, eyes ablaze with anger.

*[The next word suggested was 'evacuation', but the writers' sentences were uniformly dull, so for the first time in the Improv's history, the audience voted 'none of the above'.]*

“You want I should take him out, Capo Lini?” [*actual word suggested was ‘cappuccino’*], snarled Guido Sambucca, the ever-present Italian hitman who ran the bar. “No”, said Capo Lini magnanimously. “Don’t you see we can let him in as an honorary member? Go fetch me the tam marine [*actual word suggested was ‘tambourine’*] for him to wear.”

Fergo chose that moment to stagger to his feet. “Has anyone seen my Schroedinger’s kit-kat? I followed it here from another dimension and I can’t find it anywhere.”

“What kind of semi-colon, I mean, half-assed story is that?”, Sambucca snarled.\* “Take him out!” But at that moment, a semitransparent cat either did or did not jump into Fergo’s arms, who either did or did not disappear, and that is The End, or maybe not.

\*The panel of writers had been spelling out the punctuation during this Improv when reading aloud their sentences, so this was funnier to the audience than it might be in cold print.

### **The Changing Role Of Women In SF 1925 to 1945.**

After Canadian palaeofan Bob Gibson passed away in 2001 at the age of 92, his son donated Bob’s collection of 30,000 to 40,000 books and periodicals to the University of Calgary. The Gibson

collection is still being catalogued, but it is already being used for research. Helen Clark presented a talk on the depiction of women on WEIRD TALES covers, illustrating the erotic and sometimes outright pornographic covers that would still be controversial today in our supposedly small-l liberal society. It is nice to see that the collection is already being used, not just filed and forgotten.

### **Dinosaurs In SF.**

Dr. Phil Currie is not only a curator at the Royal Tyrell Museum of Palaeontology (the world’s largest fossil museum) in nearby Drumheller, but is an Edgar Rice Burroughs fan, having published a zine on the subject several decades ago. His talk was a mix of what is new in fossil hunting and covers of SF books and magazines depicting dinosaurs. He mentioned that it was recently shown that the mythological griffin has been traced back to its point of origin in central Asia, where miners commonly dug up bones of *Protoceratops* and ascribed them to the griffin.

Currie showed that images of dinosaurs now surround us, from the homemade statues scattered about Drumheller as folk art, to political cartoons (old politicians and parties that have been too long in power). Most of the current boom in dinosaurs dates from JURASSIC PARK. Currie mentioned that when he was young,

books about dinosaurs were relatively scarce, compared to the shelves full of them today, and he had to hunt down ERB and SF books to get his dinosaur fix. This correlates to something I noticed, as up to the late 1970s I had no trouble building a reasonably complete collection of dinosaur books in print, but had to give up when a flood of such books rolled out in the 1980s.

**Guest Of Honour Speeches.**

Esther Friesner was the Toastmaster, and started off with a list of dumb questions that Canucks can expect to hear at the forthcoming World SF Convention in Toronto on the Labour Day weekend. Examples were: What happens if a moose gets into the building?”, “How many books to a trilogy up here?” [to which my reply would be “The same as down there: ten.”], and, at a cash register, “Can you break a queenie?” [the Canadian \$1 coin is called a loonie, and the \$2 coin either a doubloon or toonie; all Canadian coins have a portrait of the Queen of Canada on the reverse].

She (Esther, not the Queen) introduced each guest with a verse from a song to which she taught the audience the chorus “There’s a little of the omnivore in us all”. Terry Brooks began his speech by saying that his mother was born in Hamilton, Ontario, and the next time Con-Version needed a Canadian GoH ... He had driven up from Seattle, along the scenic route of interior B.C.

thinking he and the family could enjoy the spectacular mountain scenery, but they ended up taking some substantial detours due to highways closed by forest fires. He mentioned that some of his writing is inspired by the landscapes he sees in his travels, so if forest fires feature prominently in his next book, you’ll know why.

**Future Cons.**

Con-Version 21, barring SARS, blackouts, and forest fires raging through the skyscrapers of downtown Cowtown, will be at the Westin Hotel again, the weekend of August 6 to 8, 2004. One announced GoH is George R.R. Martin. Details at [www.con-version.org](http://www.con-version.org)

In 2005, Calgary will host Westercon 58, on the July 1 to 4 weekend, with S.M. Stirling as GoH. Details to be had at [www.calgaryin2005.org](http://www.calgaryin2005.org)

Torcon 3, the World SF Convention, will be over by the time you read this. Toronto has had a terrible year, first with SARS and then the blackout; I wonder what the third thing will be? I had planned to go to Torcon, but family matters (settling my mother’s estate in a city 140 km from where I live) wore me down and I didn’t feel like dealing with airlines and hotels after spending months driving back and forth on executor duties.