

OPUNTIA

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IF YOU CAN'T BE SQUAMOUS, THEN AT LEAST BE ELDRITCH

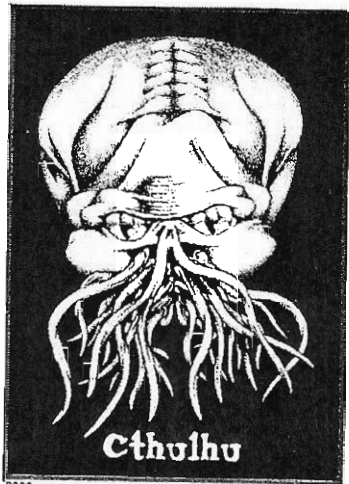
by Dale Speirs

H.P. Lovecraft is one of those writers who didn't really succeed until after he was dead. Many of his stories were set in a common framework called the Cthulhu Mythos, about the Old Ones, an alien race who might be gods. They were banished from Earth but are still lurking at the threshold, waiting to get back in and turn the human race into chattels. After HPL's death, other authors began writing pastiches set in the Mythos, and it has become a minor industry, much like Sherlock Holmes.



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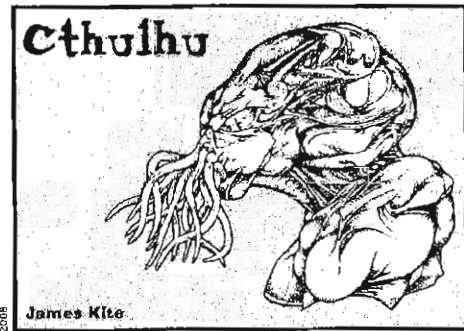
CTHULHU'S REIGN (2010, mass-market paperback) is an anthology of Mythos pastiches, edited by Darrell Schweitzer. The stories deal with the arrival and aftermath of the Old Ones, who have effortlessly conquered Earth and are now getting down to business. This is not a book to be read on a gloomy rainy day when you are depressed. I ended up reading only one story every second or third day, about all I could take where everyone gets squished like a bug after a brief and futile struggle.

The first story is "The Walker In The Cemetery" by Ian Watson, about a group of tourists in Genoa, who are touring an ancient cemetery when the Old Ones arrive. They are trapped inside with one of the Old Ones, who picks them off one by one and then saves the girl for last, to have its evil way with her. HPL established in one of his stories "The Dunwich Horror" that the Old Ones can inject genetic material into human females to get cross-breeds for their purposes.

"Sanctuary" by Don Webb concerns a man struggling to keep his small town going by salvaging food from the big city. The arrival of the Old Ones has collapsed civilization as effectively as global thermonuclear war. There is no place to hide, not even in a church.

"Her Acres Of Pastoral Playground" by Mike Allen deals with a man who thinks he is holding off one of the Old Ones with a force

field cast by a spell. But it seems that the field is failing, and then he learns that he is in a bubble inside the Old One and his wife and daughter are not as they seem.



"Nothing Personal" by Richard Lupoff is an attempt to rationalize the attack of the Old Ones by asserting that they are beings from a planet composed of antimatter, who obliterate the Earth's surface with matter-antimatter reactions. Setting aside the bad physics, and as good as the story may be, it doesn't fit in with the rest of the anthology. This is a problem with many theme anthologies, when the editor doesn't assert enough control to ensure that all the different authors are working from the same story premise.

“Spherical Trigonometry” by Ken Asamatsu takes as its point of departure the remark by HPL that the Old Ones live in the angles of the universe. A Japanese businessman who took the matter seriously before the Arrival has built a round refuge with no angles in it. All the furniture is curved; everything inside is smooth and curvilinear. He calls it The Womb. On the day of the Arrival, he and his young wife make it inside the Womb along with another young man. Supposedly they are safe, but the Old Ones penetrate after the young man has an affair with the wife. The reason is said to be that the three of them had formed a love triangle, thereby creating angles for the Old Ones to penetrate. This is really stretching it, from the physical into the philosophical, and I don’t buy it.

“The New Pauline Corpus” by Matt Cardin is about a theologian desperately trying to reconcile the arrival of the Old Ones with the Bible. It is an hilarious parody of jargon-ridden academic tracts filled with philosophical drivel that ultimately means nothing. “Ghost Dancing” by Darrell Schweitzer is on a similar theme, dealing with a black-magic cult who think their time has come and the Old Ones will respond to their rituals. No they don’t. “This Is How The World Ends” by John Fultz is about a survivalist who becomes the sole survivor of his group, and eventually gets religion. The Cthulhu religion that is, when he is physically transformed into one of them.

“What Brings The Void “ by Will Murray is about a psychic working for a government agency. They are desperately trying to find a weak point of the Old Ones as human civilization collapses. They view themselves as fighting off invaders and are perturbed to find out that the Old Ones consider that they have first rights to Earth and that humans are parasites who must be cleansed. One manifestation of the Old Ones are noctiluminescent clouds that feed on the souls of dead humans. Since the human race is being systematically eradicated, the clouds have plenty of food. The psychic goes to battle with the clouds and loses.

“The Shallows” by John Langan is a long rambling story of a man agonizing about his childhood and his own son, interspersed with vignettes of the Old Ones arriving in his neighbourhood. I get the impression that this was an unsold psychological story of angst sitting on the shelf into which was added some Cthulu Mythos to make it salable.

“Such Bright And Risen Madness In Our Names” by Jay Lake is a story of resistance fighters who think they may have discovered a poison that will kill the priests of the Old Ones, the traitors who serve the enemy. The Old Ones are gradually transforming the Earth, scraping its surface down to the bedrock, so it seems a futile struggle. Again, another what’s-the-use story.

“The Seals Of New R’Lyeh” by Gregory Frost would have been best placed at the beginning of this anthology as it deals with who the criminal was who first summoned Cthulu and the other criminals who subsequently summoned the rest of the Old Ones. An interesting read.

“The Holocaust Of Ecstasy” by Brian Stableford deals with some of the victims of the Old Ones reincarnated as fruit, on a tree waiting for its harvest. What can I say? It’s horticultural fiction gone eldritch.

“Vastation” by Laird Barron is narrated by someone who is both immortal and can travel through time. His reaction to the arrival of the Old Ones is simply that he is superior to them and can outlast them. This leaves the reader wondering what the point of the story was.

“Remnants” by Fred Chappell is an extended story about last survivors struggling against the Old Ones. They are finally saved by aliens. I skipped numerous pages en route to the finale. Dull wishful thinking.

All told, most of the stories were well written from a technical point of view, setting aside the fact that everyone dies in the end. A few stories did not fit well into the narrative theme of the anthology, even if quite readable.

FEELING YOUR OATS

by Dale Speirs

I’ve started clearing out books from my library that I haven’t read in decades and never will again, nor will anyone else thanks to the Internet making it easier just to look up something in Wikipedia. My university degree is a B.Sc. in Horticulture, taken at the Faculty of Agriculture of the University of Alberta in 1978. While most of my old textbooks are horticulturally related, I did take some other types of agricultural courses. Somewhere along the line I must have taken some crop science courses because I found some books on grass crops such as oats and wheat. It got me thinking about how many books I have lining the walls which are absolutely of no redeeming value to anyone. They are too obsolete to be of any current value and it will be a couple of centuries before anyone will treasure them as antique artifacts. I take my old books to the Co-op supermarket book exchange (take a book, leave a book) where every so often the staff thin out the unwanted books and throw them into the recycle bin.

I’ll try not to bore my readers, most of whom are city slickers, but I sat down with a 1977 trade paperback titled OAT HISTORY, IDENTIFICATION, AND CLASSIFICATION, by Franklin Coffman. He mentions that he first started working with oats in 1917, so he was ancient even then. The scientific name for oats is *Avena*, derived from the Latin root word for desirable forage.

Livestock of all kinds like oats the way humans like potato chips, except that oats are healthier for you. Samuel Johnson's great dictionary pokes a bit of fun at the Scots by defining oats as a grain that in most parts of the world is used as livestock feed but in Scotland is used to sustain humans.

Oats are native to Eurasia and were originally grown as pasture grasses, not annual crops. The cultivated type of oats is a man-made species called *Avena sativa*. Those who get hysterical about genetically modified crops don't seem to realize that humans have been tinkering with species long before Watson and Crick published their famous paper on DNA. Corn, for example, does not exist in the wild at all, and was synthesized by ancient Mexicans from teosinte grass. There are, however, some wild species of oats, some of which are considered weeds. The cultivated crop was derived from an unknown wild species, which botanists have narrowed down to one of two possibilities. Considerable heat and less light has been shed on the subject, and if you are ever in a tavern full of taxonomic graminologists you can start a brawl by asking which species cultivated oats came from. This assumes, of course, that in the infinite number of parallel universes postulated by astrophysicists, there would be at least one tavern full of drunken taxonomic graminologists.

The wild species of *Avena* have seven chromosomes. Cultivated oats have 21 chromosomes, that is, three sets of the basic seven

chromosomes. This gives them hybrid vigour, since they have backups to the backups if one set of chromosomes malfunctions.

Oats were first introduced into the USA via Mexico by the Spanish conquistadors, who, never having been to Scotland, grew them as feed for their horses. Along the northeastern seaboard, oats were independently introduced by British settlers, mostly for horses but, there being Scots present in the group, sometimes for breakfast. In Canada, Louis Hebert, recognized as the first full-time farmer in the country, planted a crop of oats on the uplands of what is now Québec City in 1617. There is no record if he ate them for breakfast but, being a Frenchman, probably not.

There was no distinction of cultivars (cultivated varieties) in those days. Oats were oats and all looked the same. As time went on, both natural and artificial selection developed cultivars in each geographical area that were suitable for the place. These were not purebred strains but neither were they a genetic scramble. If fungus rust was a problem in one area, farmers would keep the few resistant plants as seed for next year. Dryland oats became drought resistant, while oats in cool, moist areas got used to always-wet soils. In common with other crops, it wasn't until the late 1800s that agronomists began breeding pure uniform cultivars. The first purposely-done oat hybridizations didn't begin in North America and Europe until the 1870s. Hybrid cultivars weren't even registered until 1926.

Most of Coffman's book is taken up by detailed histories and descriptions of oat cultivars. I don't think I read these even when I was a university student. I'll skip it now as I doubt any zinesters care, for example, that the Fultex cultivar is derived from a cross between Fulghum and Victoria oat cultivars. For that matter, I doubt any oat breeders care either, as modern cultivars are all created in a lab with DNA recombination.

LIFE WITH NUKES

by Dale Speirs

THE ISOTOPE MAN by Charles Eric Maine (1957, hardcover) is basically a hard-bitten news reporter murder mystery mixed in with a bit of SF. Delaney is working for an English picture magazine called VIEW. A comatose man, shot twice in the back, has been fished out of the Thames River and is clinging to life. Delaney recognizes him as Dr. Stephen Rayner, prominent nuclear physicist working at the Brant Research Institute. Trouble is, the Institute has Dr. Rayner working for them in the flesh, so one of them must be a doppelganger.

Delaney decides that Scotland Yard are too complacent about the investigation, and barges about as an ersatz Sherlock Holmes. Several times he is hauled in by police and threatened with a charge of obstruction, for contrary to what he assumes, they are in

fact one step ahead of him each time.

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What Delaney doesn't consider is that by running about and blurring his information to strangers, he is putting a criminal organization on alert. Their plan, it transpires, is to sabotage a nuclear reactor at the Brant Institute. The police are trying to work quietly behind the scenes without tipping off the organization, but Delaney keeps tripping them up. Contrary to all the mystery fiction, police take a dim view of Miss Marple, and in the real world she would be brought before a judge.

The SF comes in from two directions. Firstly, the real Dr. Rayner is slightly radioactive and blurs every picture taken of him. It seems he was sloppy at handling radioisotopes, and his co-workers, the ones that would go near him, called him The Isotope Man. In real life, he should be crawling with cancer and anemia, but in this novel he seems healthy enough other than the bullet wounds. And if radiation causes one to turn into a superhero, why isn't he leaping tall buildings with a single bound? The other SF angle is that due to some sort of hand-waving argument I didn't quite get, his mind is shifted 7.5 seconds into the future. This creates problems because those talking to him think he is addled and don't realize that he is answering each question put to him 7.5 seconds before it is asked. The novel moves along briskly, and pacing is certainly not a problem. The story manages not to be dated despite being set in the late 1950s. It reads almost as a period piece.

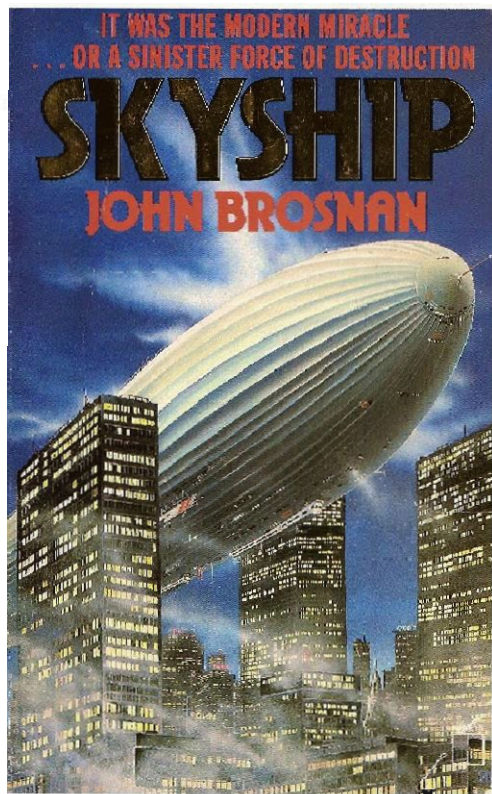
SKYSHIP by John Brosnan (1981, mass-market paperback) is a page-turning techno-thriller about a giant nuclear-powered zeppelin called Phoenix. It can carry 400 passengers plus cargo and is more than 600 metres long. (For comparison, the Twin Towers were each 405 metres tall.) Mini-infodumps about modern airships are sprinkled in throughout the novel, as the author works in as much of his research as he can, but they are not that intrusive and often quite interesting.

The plot gets rolling with Michael Colino and Peter Else, two freelance security advisors hired by Jay-Jay Ballard, the billionaire who owns the Phoenix, to protect it against sabotage and also to protect his beautiful daughter Felicity, about whom he is very possessive. All the usual cliches of action-adventure stories are there. Ballard has an alcoholic trophy wife named Fanny, who bears a startling resemblance to Felicity. Colino and Else are resented by the regular security force of Ballard's for barging in on them. Assorted groups of evil-doers are trying to take down the Phoenix for equally assorted reasons.

Colino has a strong fear of flying after a bad accident while serving in Vietnam, barely surviving a gunship crash. He tries to keep it hidden, which doesn't help much when everyone insists on ferrying him around the Phoenix site in helicopters or balloons. Felicity takes him up in a balloon and they survive a crash after someone sabotaged it.

As the novel progresses, everyone conflicts with everyone else, Colino survives an assassination attempt by a disgruntled bodyguard, and there is enough blood and gore to satisfy any horror movie director.

The glorious day finally arrives when the Phoenix makes her maiden voyage to London. As the airship crosses the USA, there are various alarms and excursions, and there's never a dull moment.



Over the North Atlantic, Colino's vertigo gets a good workout as he has to save Fanny, who is drunk and suicidal, by crawling out on the hull to retrieve her and stop her from jumping.

But finally they make it to London and moor at the Isle of Dogs. After celebrations and dignitaries, the airship loads up with ten Rolls-Royce limousines to take back to America. That was only the eye of the storm, of course, and new troubles soon erupt. Fanny crawls into a Rolls so she can get drunk in privacy. The nuclear reactor is sabotaged, the airship has no controls, and, well, you get the idea. More alarms and excursions as Colino searches for the saboteur. The crew are ordered to dump all the Rolls-Royce cars into the ocean to gain more altitude. As one of the cars drops out the hatch, a labourer thought he heard a woman cry out but wasn't sure. This was the only truly chilling moment in the novel.

By the time the Phoenix reaches New York City, it is pretty much out of control. Colino ends up dangling outside the hull again, and the city is doomed unless he can succeed. It turns out that there are two independent groups of saboteurs operating. No one can find Fanny, but there is an awful suspicion as to what happened to her. When the shouting finally dies down, Colino gets Felicity and the backlash against the saboteurs ensures that a new airship will be built.

WHAT IS FAPA?

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I circulate OPUNTIA through a science fiction apa called Fantasy Amateur Press Association (FAPA). For those of you receiving this issue who do not know what an apa is, please read on.

Modern zine publishing as we know it today began in the middle 1800s as cheap, home-use printing presses became available to the general public. Zinesters developed a distro method called the amateur press association (apa) where members sent x number of copies of their zine to a central mailer (also known as the official editor). The zines are collated into bundles, and each member gets back one bundle of everyone's zines. There is an annual fee to cover postage, but this works out cheaper than mailing individual copies. Apas have a minimum level of activity required, such as publishing 8 pages a year. It must be emphasized that apas are not for passive subscribers; you must commit to the minimum activity level or you will be booted out.

The oldest apa is the National A.P.A., founded 1876. FAPA was founded in 1937. Details from Robert Lichtman, 11037 Broadway Terrace, Oakland, California 994611-1948. In addition to articles, there will be mailing comments on other apazines in the last FAPA bundle. I quote the remark I am commenting on or otherwise make the context clear, so hopefully an outsider can still read the comments with interest.

MAILING COMMENTS FOR FAPA #299

FAPA #299 received on 2012-05-25 at Calgary. The Clearcut Award for most pages in a bundle goes to Dale Speirs for 24 pages (48 half-pages).

Forgotten Horror Actors: Re: Boris Karloff and his wife emigrating to the USA via Canada. *“Both claimed to be citizens of Canada, which was not entirely true unless the birth in England and India conferred upon them a colonial citizenship which would include the Commonwealth of Canada.”* Prior to the 1931 Statute of Westminster, British subjects did not have to jump through hoops to become Canadian citizens. They automatically were, and vice versa. My father’s ancestors came from Scotland in the middle 1800s and never applied for citizenship. They didn’t have to; they could automatically vote in elections, hold public office, serve in the militia (Canada didn’t have an standing army until 1885), and, of course, pay taxes. My mother’s family was Finnish, arriving in Alberta before WW1, and they had to apply for citizenship. Finland was occupied by Russia at the time, so they were traveling on Russian passports.

There is no Commonwealth of Canada. The formal title of Canada is the Dominion of Canada; it has never been a commonwealth. It is a member of the British Commonwealth, but has never been so styled in itself. The term Dominion is seldom

if ever used anymore but is still legal. Likewise, Odessa has never been in Russia; it is a major city of Ukraine. Many anglophones whose geographical knowledge was shaky commonly referred to it as being in Russia because at that time Ukraine was part of the Russian Empire and later part of the Soviet Empire.

Lofgeornost: I have quite a stack of Sherlock pastiche reviews waiting for OPUNTIA, so I read your remarks on Sherlockian literature with interest. People today think of Sherlock stories as period pieces, but when Doyle wrote them they were contemporary fiction set in the same world of the readers or at least within living memory.

Entropy Blues: Re: criticism of Robert Sawyer by the snobs in the Canlitcrit crowd. Sawyer doesn’t need me to defend him as he laughs all the way to the bank, but if it were me I’d ignore what I call pretentious drivellism. He is a friendly author to know. Strangely enough, I keep bumping into him at the University of Calgary or bookstore signings more often than I see him at SF conventions. I remarked to him a while back that for someone from Toronto, he sure spends a lot of time in Cowtown.

Voice Of The Habu: “ ... *modern cell phones have too many features.*” My cellphone until recently, and my first, was a 1998 candy-bar style with a physical keyboard and an antenna. I would still be using it but the batteries would no longer

hold a charge for more than one phone call, and I couldn't get replacement batteries because they were non-standard types the manufacturer quit making a decade ago. As of 2012-03-21, I joined the modern era with a Samsung Galaxy running on Android software on a 4G network. Quite a steep learning curve but I have to admit it is much handier with many features, although I will not load it with dozens or hundreds of apps as some people do. It has soft keys only (no physical keyboard) and when turned off, is a pure black slab.

After I bought the Samsung, I got to thinking about my grandparents, all of whom died during the early 1980s. If I went back in time and showed them my 1998 candy-bar cellphone, they could probably guess what it was. It had a physical keyboard and a small antenna, so they would guess it to be a miniature walkie-talkie or radio-telephone. If I showed them my smartphone while it was turned off, they would have no idea what it was, except perhaps a pocket calculator.

PUNCHING JUDY

by Dale Speirs

The name Judy LaMarsh is only vaguely remembered by older Boomer Canadians. I would be surprised if any of the younger generation know who she was. She was a federal cabinet minister

in the Lester Pearson government of the Liberal party during the 1960s, and was responsible for introducing the Canada Pension Plan. After leaving politics, she published her autobiography in 1968, titled MEMOIRS OF A BIRD IN A GILDED CAGE. From there she faded into obscurity and died of cancer in 1980.

By her account and every one else who knew him, Pearson was a weak leader and couldn't keep control of his caucus. He had previously been a career diplomat, and was never used to the rough-and-tumble nature of federal politics in Canada. His opponent was John Diefenbaker, leader of the Progressive Conservative party, widely considered to be one of the greatest populist orators Canada has produced. Pearson was an easterner from Toronto, Diefenbaker was a flatlander from Saskatchewan, and the two found themselves chained together in politics for a decade. They were both Prime Ministers in succession, but for most of that time Pearson governed with a minority government and Diefenbaker was continually frustrated because he constantly just missed getting back into power after each election.

Diefenbaker was a stern leader but capricious, so when he was in power his government was just as chaotic as Pearson's but for different reasons. Historians refer to that decade as the Diefenbaker-Pearson years. Pearson, in his self-deprecating way, said he didn't mind them linking him to his enemy but resented

getting second billing. The long view of history is that the Pearson government was the most effective in Canadian history. It was during his tenure that Canada got its maple leaf flag, a self-funding pension plan, free universal health care, divorce and abortion reform, and abolished the death penalty. (Which last item put Arthur Ellis, Canada's last hangman, out of work. He is remembered today by the Arthur Ellis Award for mystery writing, equivalent to the Edgar Awards in the USA.)

That decade was also, however, a time of violent separatist attacks in Québec, Albertans upset over a transcontinental oil pipeline, Maritimers living in poverty, and a debate over the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and what constituted Canadian culture.

Judy LaMarsh was in the thick of it. She was one of very few female M.P.s, much less being a cabinet minister, and not a junior one at that. She held major portfolios and if there was any shouting going on in the House of Commons, she was usually at the centre of it. She was born and raised in the Niagara Falls region, served in WW2 as a Japanese translator, and then became a lawyer. Her father was a staunch Liberal and as the twig is bent so grows the tree. When first elected to the Niagara Falls riding, she had to put up with all kinds of male chauvinism but was made of stern stuff and fought her way to the point where even her enemies had to respect her.

When the Pearson Liberals finally made it into power, LaMarsh discovered that the pomp and circumstance were not always what she imagined it to be. The Parliament buildings were ancient and so was the plumbing. The cabinet meeting room was too small and poorly ventilated. Security in those days consisted of closing the door so that reporters and other undesirables lurking in the corridor couldn't overhear, but with people constantly coming and going during meetings, they did pick up scraps. Information leaks were so common that newspaper cartoonists commonly depicted the Liberal government as a leaky ship with all hands bailing during whatever was the latest crisis.

Most of the crises that bedeviled Pearson have long since been consigned to the dustbin of history. The first budget boldly promised to go where no budget had gone before but was quickly shredded by opposition critics. Pearson didn't have the guts to stand up to them and threw his Minister of Finance overboard. LaMarsh's details about how the Canada Pension Plan was created only confirms the old saying that if you enjoy sausages or the law, don't watch either of them being made. The joy of the 1967 Centennial celebrations was marred by the FLQ terrorist attacks in Québec, and the constant feuding between the provinces and the federal government. (Liberal or Tory, it didn't matter. Still doesn't today.)

After another election and another minority government, Pearson made LaMarsh a minister without portfolio and put her in charge of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. The CBC was synonymous with protecting Canadian culture. This is often referred to as the Canadian content issue, or simply Cancon. In those days, it must be remembered, cable television didn't exist and there were only three or four broadcast stations in any given city, while country folk were lucky if they had one within range. The CBC was therefore of far greater importance than it is today. Management at the CBC was atrocious even by bureaucratic standards, and LaMarsh spent most of her time winking out the incompetents rather than establishing new policies. Pearson, of course, was more hindrance than help.

Pearson announced far in advance that he was going to retire as party leader, a foolish thing to do as this made him a lame duck and distracted his ambitious cabinet ministers from their jobs. The infighting was first discrete but soon the ambitious began campaigning openly. Pierre Trudeau, then the Minister of Justice, was the eventual winner. LaMarsh knew she would not have a chance. She had enough and retired from politics.

In re-reading this book, which I bought secondhand back in the 1980s, I realized just how unimportant most of the major issues of the day were. The pension plan and universal health care were honourable exceptions, but most of the scandals and crises evoke

a sense of "So what?" among those such as I who were around then and look back from four decades later. LaMarsh goes into excruciating detail about those scandals, none of which have had any influence on the course of Canadian history. This book will be donated to the Co-op Book Exchange, its only value being that it was autographed by LaMarsh for the previous owner.

SHERLOCKIANA: PART 9

by Dale Speirs

[Parts 1 to 3 appeared in issues #63.1B to #63.1D, Part 4 in #67.1D, Part 5 in #68.1C, Part 6 in #69.1E, Part 7 in #70.1A, and Part 8 in #71.1B.]

Pastiches: Professor Moriarty.

From the anthology *GASLIGHT GROTESQUE* (2009, trade paperback) is the short story "The Hand-Delivered Letter" by Simon Unsworth. It is in the form of a long florid letter from Professor Moriarty to Holmes, announcing his revenge on the great detective. The letter meanders about at great length to little effect, and I began skipping pages from the opening paragraph. There was a plot in there somewhere but fortunately it was capsulized in the last few paragraphs. Too wordy by far.

Also from the same collection is “The Best Laid Plans” by Robert Lauderdale. The story has Holmes executing his master plan to destroy Moriarty, not at the well-known waterfalls in Switzerland, but with the aid of Scotland Yard to carry out one master sweep against his organization. Watson, accompanying the police, discover that Moriarty has been experimenting with turning humans into animals, or perhaps vice versa. No sign of Dr. Moreau, though. The Professor also shows a remarkable ability to revive himself after fatal bullet wounds, no doubt in the hopes of a sequel.

From the collection BETWEEN THE THAMES AND THE TIBER (2011, hardcover) of short stories by Ted Riccardi is “Porlock’s Demise”, about a henchman of Professor Moriarty who was occasionally supplying Holmes with information. The Professor finds out and after that it is just when, not if, Porlock is eliminated. The case, such as it is, involves Holmes attempting to decode a message written by Moriarty’s 2-in-C, Col. Sebastian Moran, and intercepted by Porlock. The code is vague enough that it could mean anything, and Holmes doesn’t succeed until too late.

THE STAR OF INDIA (2011, trade paperback) by Carole Buggé starts off with Holmes and Watson dealing with the young woman Violet Merriweather, who is troubled by something and a very poor liar at concealing it. Before that plot line gets going, they

receive a telegram from Cornwall, where Mrs. Hudson was visiting her sister and has apparently fallen into danger. They rush off to see her but it turns out to be a diversionary tactic to get Holmes out of town so that evil minions can do their work in London. It appears that Professor Moriarty didn’t die at the Reichenbach Falls any more than Holmes did.

Moriarty is taunting Holmes by sending him coded messages as chess moves, but the Professor isn’t entirely free to move on his own. He is struggling to reassemble his criminal organization which fragmented during his absence. Another plot coupon is the theft of a gem called the Star of India, which Moriarty is either trying to use for ransom money or to trigger a diplomatic incident. It all comes to a head at a Royal ceremony in the Tower of London. Moriarty is foiled but slips away and goes into hiding until the sequel is written. Merriweather is exposed after several incidents of foreshadowing which by the penultimate chapter amounted to the author jumping up and down and waving a red flag in the reader’s face. Despite this, the novel was a reasonably good read.

From the anthology GASLIGHT ARCANUM (2011, trade paperback) is “The Executioner” by Lawrence Connolly, which takes place in the immediate aftermath of the Reichenbach Falls. A local mad scientist found the bodies of both Holmes and Moriarty and revived them.

Holmes is intact and can function normally again, but Moriarty is but a torso and head living in pain. The scientist will not put him out of his agony, so Holmes must finish the job. A brutal story that would have made a good Vincent Price movie back when.

From that same anthology is "The Adventure Of The Six Maledictions" by Kim Newman, a hilarious novella about the Professor gathering up sacred artifacts of cults and secret societies. He does so in order to touch off a war between them to take each other out and leave him standing in the field unchallenged. The story is narrated by his aide Col. Sebastian Moran and is very well done. It is a parody of all those epics where someone steals the Sacred Knick-Knack of Qwerty and is pursued by high priests and acolytes wanting to get their precious back.

Pastiches: Jack The Ripper Crossovers.

The Whitechapel murders committed by Jack the Ripper are probably one of the most popular Sherlock Holmes crossovers because the two were contemporary in both time and space. Many authors have tried their hand (or keyboard) at combining the two. The difficulty here is that one cannot stray too far from the known facts, made worse because the true identity of the culprit was never discovered in our timeline.

DUST AND SHADOW by Lyndsay Faye (2009, hardcover) brings Holmes into the investigation of the murders done by Jack the Ripper. Events proceed as they did, and Holmes hires a prostitute named Mary Ann Monk to see if she can pick up information in the places where he cannot go. Holmes comes this close to catching the Ripper but is wounded by the Ripper's knife trying to take him into custody. Not only is Holmes subsequently hampered by the wound, there is a tabloid journalist is trying to make him a suspect for the sake of sensationalism and selling newspapers. Holmes is being tried in the media for crimes not proven against him. (Fortunately such things don't happen today.) The Ripper also taunts Holmes and begins planting evidence to implicate him. Scotland Yard isn't having an easy time of it either, trying to calm the public and prevent riots by mobs looking to blame the Jews or foreigners.

The ability of the Ripper to vanish without a trace seems supernatural to some but it becomes increasingly evident that there is a more prosaic reason. Holmes concludes that the Ripper is actually one of the police constables on the Whitechapel beat. He lays a trap which backfires and barely escapes with his life. The Ripper is killed by Inspector Lestrade and the whole thing covered up.

The novel read well and was realistic in its treatment of how the police would handle the case. In real life, the London police were

hampered by an incompetent commissioner (who was later forced to resign), major distractions such as the Lord Mayor's Parade which took up much of their manpower, and having to work in a hostile environment, the slums of Whitechapel.

THE WHITECHAPEL HORRORS by Edward Hanna (2010, trade paperback) concentrates on the setting and ambience, particularly of the East End slums where the Ripper did his murders. Proper Victorian society had no idea how the poor and destitute (two separate economic categories) lived. Watson does not narrate, and everything is told from the third-person point of view, which can be jarring sometimes since both the canon and most pastiches usually have Watson tell the story. The chronology of the Ripper murders overlapped with **THE HOUND OF THE BASKERVILLES**, so initially Holmes has to keep breaking away to deal with the dog out on the moors. The hound is disposed of, and the rest of the novel becomes a period piece, as Holmes chases one clue after another to no avail.

Suspects in real life were many, including at least one royal prince, and the investigation in this story narrows down to him. The reader is led up several garden paths, but in the denouement there is no "J'accuse!" moment and Holmes cannot identify who the Ripper is. With no satisfactory resolution possible, the novel has to carry itself on the ambience and history of Victorian London. It is done very well and kept me reading despite

knowing that there would be no answer to the central question that has existed for more than a century: "Who was Jack the Ripper?"

Pastiches: Mycroft Holmes.

James Lincoln Warren came across an historical reference that mentioned the British government used military doctors as spies. That gave him the idea for "Shikari" (**ELLERY QUEEN MYSTERY MAGAZINE**, 2012 February), a secret history of Watson's work as an agent for Mycroft Holmes. Sherlock's smarter brother, who is something in the Foreign Office, uses him to keep tabs on the great detective, who keeps unknowingly barging into Mycroft's investigations and ruining cases. The pastiche is nicely told by alternating extracts from two secret memoirs recently uncovered, one by Col. Sebastian Moran and the other by Stamford (who introduced Holmes and Watson to each other). There is an alternative version of the case of the not so Honourable Ronald Adair, and several tie-ins to other cases. Well written.

HARE-RAISING BUSINESS

photos by Dale Speirs



Because there are no small children or dogs in my household, and because I grow clumps of wildflowers and shrubs in the lawn rather than formal beds, there is more wildlife in my yard than my neighbours. The yard is screened by hedges out front and a high solid board fence in back, so this gives animals a sense of security. One denizen at Chez Opuntia for more than a year now is a snowshoe hare. These hares are common throughout the city, and

one of them likes my yard enough to take up permanent residence. The photo at left shows him/her/it under a big spruce in the front yard, taken on 2012-01-01. It nested there at night and went foraging by day through the neighbourhood. The spruce kept the snow off and the thick tangle of low branches made it impossible for a coyote to attack. In spring, the hare's coat turned brown, and it now spends much of its time nibbling my lawn. It likes to sit underneath my backyard peonies, as shown below on June 3 (look closely at lower left of shrub).

