

OPUNTIA 318

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

WHEN WORDS COLLIDE 2015

by Dale Speirs

Calgary's annual readercon When Words Collide was held on the third weekend in August at the Delta Calgary South Hotel on the corner of Bonaventure Drive SE and Southland Drive. Easy access by car, plenty of free parking, and a few blocks from the Southland LRT station. The only serious failing was that the hotel is split across Bonaventure Drive with a third-story pedestrian overpass connecting its two halves. This wouldn't matter much to an average hotel guest but to a convention attendee walking back and forth to seminar rooms, it was an annoying up-and-down-and-all-around hike. It was easier and faster to go outside onto the street and cross at the intersection. Unfortunately hotel space in Calgary is expensive for the type and number of function rooms required for a readercon, so WWC has to settle for what it can get.

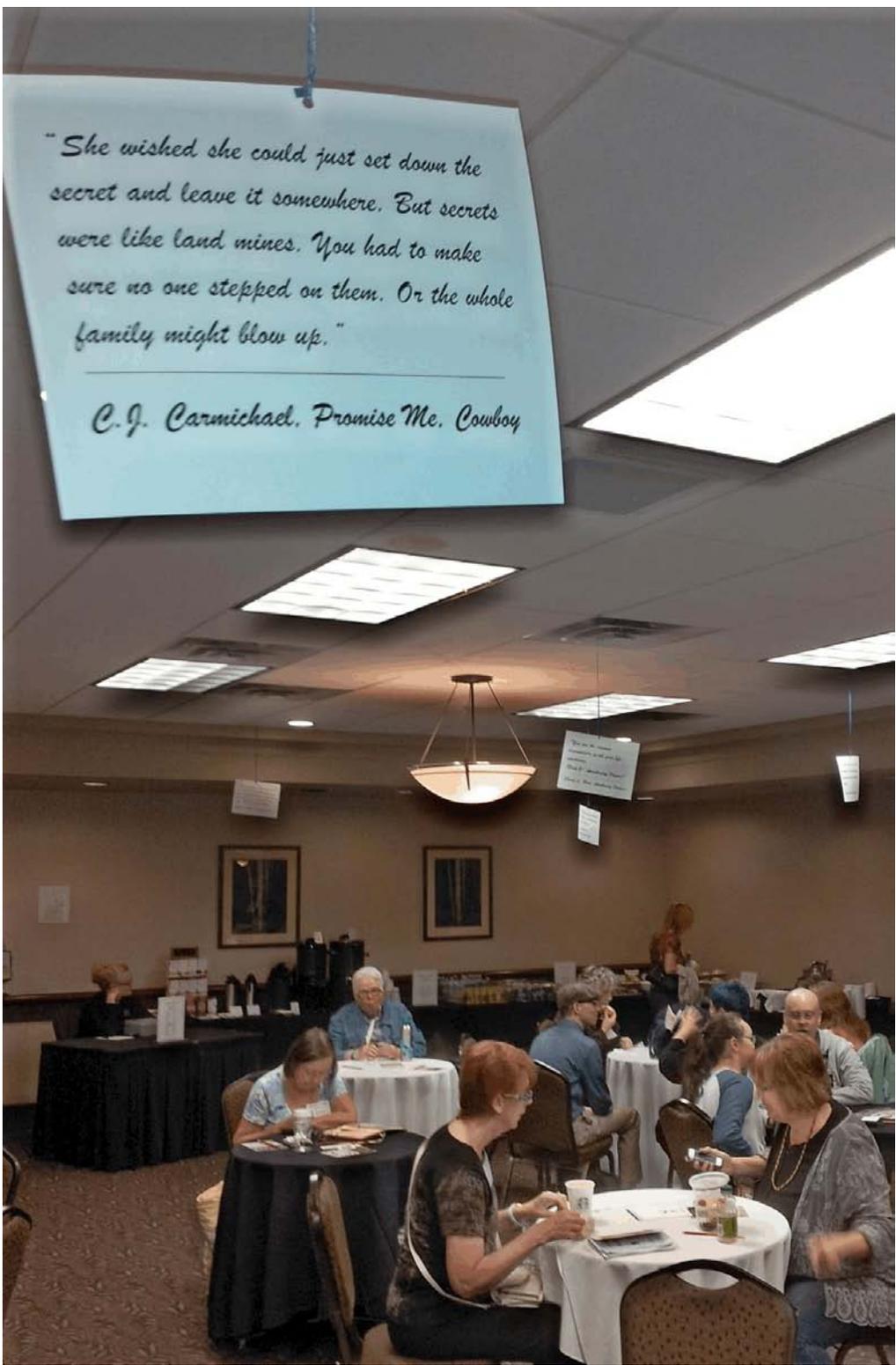
The membership cap of 650 was reached in June. This was a real convention, not a mob of 100,000 like a comic con. WWC is devoted to genre fiction, from science fiction to fantasy to mystery to romance. It has a strong workshop component, not just how to write, but how to sell in this online world. At an eyeball guess, the membership was about two-thirds female, mostly middle-aged women and grannies. I was one of the few men who wasn't bald.



A view of the hotel corridor across Bonaventure Drive, showing WWC attendees making the long trek. Up three floors on an elevator, cross over, and down three floors on the other elevator.

WWC is almost a trade show these days, with so many editors and publishers. The pitch sessions, for hungry authors to sell their novels to editors and publishers, were full up. Everyone these days is trying to publish their novel. I was one of a few members who did not have a novel in progress.

Rather than a chronological report, I'll group the panels I attended into themes, and start each review with its blurb from the programme book. Most of the panels were about the nuts-and-bolts of writing and publishing, which is what drew the majority of attendees.



Signs were hung from the ceiling in the dealer bourse and café. The quotes on the signs were from various authors in attendance at WWC.

Life In The Real World.

*“Things TV and Movies Gets Wrong in Medical or Police Procedurals”
Dwayne Clayden
“That’s not the way I was taught to do CPR!” Or “When he was shot, he was blown back 20 feet!” TV and movies tend to go for sensationalism, not realism. What is it they get wrong, and does it really matter to viewers, be they laymen or professionals in the field? A humorous, at times tongue-in-cheek, look at Hollywood.*

Clayden was first a Calgary police officer and then became a paramedic because a policeman’s lot is not a happy one. He worked as an extra on the television series FARGO, filmed on location in Fort Macleod because it still looks like 1979. (Fort Macleod is a two-hour drive south of Calgary. It is a town that time forgot.) The producers went to great efforts to find vehicles and clothing appropriate to the late 1970s, but then brought in a cube truck-style ambulance that didn’t come into use until the middle 1980s. They also showed paramedics using gurneys and emergency treatments that weren’t common until the 1990s.

Real-life crime labs are located in dingy basements and often use outdated equipment. It takes three months for results because of the backlog, not three hours as in a television show. There is no single database for police files, DNA types, vehicle records, and building ownership. Existing databases are incompatible with each other, so police use many bureaucracies and computer systems to collect data. Unlike television cops, a detective cannot sit down at a computer and bring up a single file that has everything about a criminal.

DNA samples are seldom used in murder investigations because so many people have used a room that there are dozens or hundreds of DNA types. Dumpster evidence is worthless because there is so much contamination. Dental records are only used to confirm identities if the body is badly damaged and police know who the victim was. Since they must know who the dentist is, dental records are seldom used. Even modern surveillance camera photos are crap; they might help in an investigation but not as evidence to convict. What is critical is the chain of evidence from crime scene to courtroom.

It is allowable artistic licence to have in a show only one police sergeant, a couple of detectives, and a few uniforms covering a wide area of a city. In the real world, moving across district boundaries in an average investigation would involve dozens of police personnel, obviously an impossible casting call. Clayden wrote a memoir of his time as a constable, but the publisher rejected it because there were 78 different officers for the reader to track.

Police do not kick in doors because criminals fire through the door and because it is a good way to twist an ankle or pull a tendon. Police use 10-kilo battering rams and swing it while standing off to one side of the door. There are no swarms of cops firing away all at once due to crossfire and ricochet hazards. In outdoor gun battles, police do not hide behind a car door because the sheet metal is too thin to stop a bullet and their feet are exposed. They hide behind the car, or behind a tire if firing crossways across the car. Bullets do not knock a man backwards off his feet; they don't have the mass or momentum.

In his paramedic career, Clayden said he was irritated by television shows where the doctor pushes aside a nurse or paramedic to administer CPR. Emergency ward patients are not seen by a doctor until after the paramedics or nurses have stabilized the situation. CPR has a very low success rate. Flatline patients are dead and cannot be revived. For a patient to be revived, there still has to be some blipping on the screen, however small. And please don't ever call a paramedic an ambulance driver.



At right is a display showing three Aurora awards. A close-up of two of them are at left.



You Sat Down And Typed Something. Now What?

Tie-In Fiction Demystified

Dave Gross

There is a big market for tie-in books, whether for games, television, or even other books. Some authors seem to have cornered the market while others don't even know what part of town it's in. Why write a tie-in? How to write to canon. And how to go about getting involved.

Gross started off by remarking that the difference between fan-fic and tie-in writing is that you get paid for the latter. Tie-ins pay higher than regular science fiction but the ceiling is lower with no royalties since the tie-in is a work-for-hire. A danger for some tie-in writers is that after doing it for a while, they can't write original fiction anymore. They are sucked into the tie-in world and have trouble thinking of original stories that don't duplicate the tie-ins.

The writer has a lack of control of the story line, which must conform to the studio line. Television and movies are collaborative efforts, so a tie-in writer answers not only to an editor, but also the producer, director, production designer, head writer, company vice-presidents, and anyone else with a piece of the action. Studios have revolving doors in their staff offices, so the people in charge frequently come and go.

Unlike a self-employed writer who can work at her own schedule, a tie-in writer must adhere to strict deadlines and expect several rewrite demands. He is not part of the studio family and will be cut loose at a moment's notice. To break into a market, you have to have some published paid work you can refer an editor, preferably short stories because that is what television episodes are. Smaller publishers are more trouble to deal with as they are often in over their heads and are late paying the writer.

Writing the Series

C.J. Carmichael discusses why it is in both the writer and the reader's interest to write series rather than stand-alone books. Tips include how to world build, how to control your characters over a span of 4 or more books, plotting a series arc as well as story arcs, and marketing tips for selling your series.

Carmichael has forty romance novels published, and knows how to write series. She feels the payoff for time and money spent on promotion is multiplied with a series because the books reinforce each other. Each novel must be complete

in itself without the reader having to buy the previous book, yet there should be an overall story arc that encourages readers to buy previous volumes and anticipate future books.

It is important to keep track of details about characters and settings. Readers like to see a map of the places in the novel. She uses several groups of characters who interact over the series, so continuity is important. A series should end with the reader still wanting more instead of dragging it out until sales decline. Start more than one series and interlink them so that when the main series closes, an author can begin a new series that readers will want to follow.

Turning Books into Games

Jean Leggett

Push story realms beyond pages. Jean Leggett demonstrates software that turns mystery and other books into games.

Leggett is with the One More Story Games company, which has recently begun marketing software which allows authors to convert their stories into computer games. Interactive fiction dates back to the 1970s, where users entered commands such as "go west" or "kill troll", but it was later displaced by video games that were faster and more colourful. The OMS software is a hybrid between the two types, with up to 30,000 words of the author's text. Highlighting on the text allows the user to move into the video graphics after reading the introductory text for each unit and learning the situation. The user can then change the storyline (within limits) by choices in the graphics section. There are lots of maps, building plans, and background landscapes. This type of story interaction is best for tablets and is not recommended for smartphones. Authors can use the system as advertising to draw people to their own Websites and book sales, since abundant links are provided.

Leggett discussed the narrative systems. Books use linear narrative. Games use several styles of narratives. Railroad narratives are where choices switch the story into a different track but can later switch back to the original track. Sandbox narratives give the user a batch of choices. Use two or three, then go on with the story, which may involve stepping into another sandbox or following the railroad narrative. Tree narratives use either/or dichotomies for choosing, but a user who wants to go to a different narrative has to backtrack all the way to the appropriate decision point.



The bourse had only new books and publishers. Not a crystal or costume accessory in sight. Some of my purchases will be reviewed in future issues of this zine.

Genres: Mysteries.

“The Essentiality of Place to Mystery Fiction”

Caterina Edwards, Sam Wiebe, SG Wong, Kevin Thornton

More than a character, setting provides mood and voice to mystery fiction, and often is essential to the plot. A murder in Calgary, Alberta is a much different affair than a murder in Calgary, Scotland.

For those who missed the humour in the blurb, the city of Calgary (population 1.2 million) is named after the hamlet of Calgary on the Isle of Mull. The panel started off by discussing stories that read okay to those who have never been to its setting but grate on the nerves of those who know the place.

Thornton said if you’re writing about a place you’ve never been, don’t go into details. He cited as an example a literary jury he was on where all but him was in favour of a story set in modern-day Afghanistan. Thornton had recently returned from a tour of duty over there with the Canadian Forces and objected to some of the details. The story mentioned the scent of blooming flowers in a city, but he said the pervasive odour everywhere in Afghanistan is the stink of dried cattle dung being burned for heat and cooking fires. The story also had a character casually hailing a taxi and driving up to a hotel, an impossibility in a country where car bombs are routine and so are concrete barriers and military checkpoints. The jury was swayed and the literary prize went elsewhere.

Edwards told about her time in Europe where an Italian writer had set a series of bestseller novels in the poorest part of southern Sicily where he grew up. As a result, tourists began visiting the area because they enjoyed the novels and the writer had the satisfaction of seeing new jobs created there. She mentioned the BBC doing an adaptation of one of her stories and ruining it by relocating it to a more convenient site for location shooting. The problem was that the story relied heavily on the original setting for symbolic interpretations.

Thornton mentioned that many stories fall apart if removed from their setting. As an example, when he was in South Africa during the apartheid era, he saw park benches with signs on them “Whites Only”. A story about the

pigheadedness of Afrikaaners is well illustrated by that vignette, but not if the plot is transferred elsewhere.

Wong suggested that writers who want to use an unfamiliar area in their story should ask on social media for people to tell them what they like best about the place and what they liked least. A more detailed setting will help immerse the reader into the story, but avoid lectures and infodumps about it.

“Mystery Shorts”

Axel Howerton, Darusha Wehm, Jayne Barnard, Sam Wiebe, Constantine Kaoukakis

What are the ingredients and markets for short mystery stories? Short mystery stories need to be succinct and punchy. They are a writing challenge on their own. There are conventions, guidelines and various markets to be considered. Join us for a lively discussion to learn about the writing opportunity.

Wehm said short stories are harder to write than novels because the background and characterization is harder to fit in, whereas a novel has more room to develop. Axel Howerton said short stories are declining because it was too much hard work. Jayne Barnard disagreed, saying a short story comeback will be on tablets and smartphones because commuters can read a full story in one trip.

There was an extended discussion by the panelists about specific short story markets, which I won't mention since they would only be of interest to aspiring authors trying to find markets to place their stories. Most of these are online and come and go with the wind. The good news today is that anyone can publish. The bad news today is that anyone can publish.



Montreal had a table in the bourse for their bid to host the 2017 SF Worldcon.

Sherlock Holmes in the 21st Century

Constantine Kaoukakis

There is nothing elementary about Sherlock Holmes, who was created in the 19th century. Today, he is more complex and more popular than ever before. In television and movies, there are various depictions of the great detective, which reflect the society in which he operates. The BBC Sherlock and the CBS' Elementary depict different incarnations. Both seem to be damaged: one is a "sociopath" and the other is a recovering drug addict with relationship issues. Are these the Sherlocks we deserve? What do they reveal about us and the era we live in?

Kaoukakis focused on the current television and movie versions, which clearly demonstrate that Sherlock Holmes is not going to be forgotten. Updating and changing Holmes has been going on from the beginning on stage and later in movies. Doyle never objected; it must be remembered that the stories were written as contemporary fiction, not period pieces as we view them today.

On television, the Victorian era has been replaced by the Millennium era. In one rendition, Watson is now a blogger instead of writing for STRAND MAGAZINE, and is female in another television series. Holmes's pipe, which was introduced by the actor William Gillette, is now politically incorrect, what Kaoukakis referred to as a three-patch problem. There are several versions of Irene Adler, one of which is a dominatrix.

Thriller VS Traditional Mysteries

Jodie Renner, Constantine Kaoukakis, Dwayne Clayden, Susan Calder

In many camps, thriller is considered a sub-genre of mystery. Yet it can be argued that thriller and traditional mysteries have different readerships with little overlap. Indeed, many bookstores have a separate category for action/thriller. Our panel of thriller and traditional mystery authors discuss this dilemma, look for common ground, and perhaps develop some new definitions.

The panelists agreed the difference between the two forms is that traditional mysteries such as cozies are puzzles set to the reader, while in thrillers the perpetrator is known and the suspense is in the chase. Renner said authors must make a promise to readers so that a cozy stays a cozy and doesn't suddenly depict graphic torture scenes or detailed violence. Clayden said that in a thriller the criminal and the police officer have equal time on stage. In a cozy, the body is quickly hustled off-stage and the rest of the book emphasizes the investigation to find the culprit.

The panelists also agreed that categories matter, since bookstore and online customers don't have time to sort through tens of thousands of titles. A novel that straddles categories may have a difficult sale, and if mis-categorized, can prejudice readers against an author.



Renshaw, McCharles, Kaoukakis, and Jackson, discussing their grandmothers.

Not Your Grandmother's Mystery

G. W. Renshaw, Randy McCharles, Constantine Kaoukakis, Jessica L. Jackson, Virginia Carraway Stark

Authors of genres outside mainstream mystery discuss the importance of including mystery elements in other genres, such as steampunk, paranormal, and fantasy, and how they do it.

The panelists agreed that psychology plays a bigger part in mysteries today, with characters working off their childhood traumas and subconscious feelings. The audience understands psychology better today, whereas pre-WW2 novels were just obvious traits such as love, greed, and fear with obvious causes.

Jackson said she puts mysteries into her romance novels because she likes plotted stories, not “Boy meets girl, 200 pages, boy kisses girl, 200 pages, they

breakup, 200 pages, they reconcile”. Renshaw said that while he was doing a book tour, a dear old lady stopped by his table but declined to buy his books because she said she only read dead authors. Renshaw wasn't prepared to go that far to make the sale.

McCharles said that in North America, mystery is just a marketing category invented by booksellers, not a genre. Stark added that the variety of subgenres today were created by publishers to separate their books from the main herd and catch the eye of the reader. The books really aren't new sub-genres. Kaoukakis said that notwithstanding the new varieties of mysteries, cozy mysteries are still the majority sold.

Genres: Science Fiction And Fantasy.

Eco-Fiction

Hayden Trenholm, Michael J. Martineck, Sarah Kades, Susan Forest, Nina Munteanu

The rise of environmental fiction has spawned several sub-genres such as climate fiction, eco-thrillers, eco-mystery, eco-punk, and eco-romance. In Barbara Kingsolver's 2012 novel Flight Behavior, climate change plays a major role in a story about people's beliefs and actions. Environmental catastrophe plays a major role in Margaret Atwood's MaddAddam and Ian McEwan's Solar. Is eco-fiction simply a new fad or does it reflect a cultural awakening to current environmental issues? What role does eco-fiction play in storytelling and defining ourselves? Should eco-fiction educate? How can an eco-fiction writer prevent it from becoming polemic?

Martineck said eco-fiction is not a fad. It is best in novel length because settings are the major part of the story and they need more room to develop.

Trenholm says he is strictly a city slicker and hates walking through the woods (laughter from the audience). His eco-fiction was inspired when he noticed a sudden lack of pigeons in his home city. He investigated and learned that because the surrounding forest had been cut down by developers, raptors such as peregrine falcons and hawks moved into the downtown where there were lots of ledges to nest on and plenty of pigeons for food.

Forest said she ran into a problem with group think. She only knows environmentalists but was shocked to find out that her in-laws used the same facts but interpreted them differently. She said stories, particularly television,

allow people to become informed in a gradual way, whereas a frontal attack only puts up walls. Eco-fiction could therefore have a moderating effect that Greenpeace never could.

Science Fiction and the Future

Daniel Abraham, Robert J. Sawyer, Hayden Trenholm, Edward Willett
From spaceships and aliens to medical tampering and secret military weapons, science fiction books have never been as varied and exciting as they are now. Authors of science fiction discuss their books and the vivid visions science fiction has to offer, from distant space to our own backyards.

Sawyer said few mundanes think further ahead than the next fiscal year or federal elections. SF authors collectively list all the possibilities of the future, not as predictions but as What If? scenarios. Willett said the near future is a topical read but the danger is that it may be obsolete quickly, sometimes even before the book is published.

Sawyer said that authors must be happy unto themselves before any others, then the readers, when writing stories intended to survive into the long future. He cited his 1985 conversation with Isaac Asimov, who said he wasn't going to change his style just to reach a new audience.

Faith in Science Fiction And Fantasy

Lorna Suzuki, Halli Lilburn, J. Y. T. Kennedy, Janet Nicolson
In the fiction of 'what if?' what role does and can faith play? What are some of the messages that apply to our mundane lives that authors seek to deliver by turning to speculative fiction?

Lilburn said she was initially afraid to put religious faith into her novels for fear of offending readers. After she did so in one novel where the situation required it, she discovered it wasn't the problem she thought it was. She noticed the most blatant example was Star Wars. Most SF writers are in denial about how future peoples will behave, and try to pretend that religion is outdated and will go away.

Kennedy said a lot of SF replaces Christianity with aliens. Instead of salvation by Jesus, it is salvation by aliens, who will save us from ourselves. Nicolson said religion in SF is often used to help characters face a struggle for survival when they have nothing else.

Messing With History

Tim Reynolds, Barb Galler-Smith, R. J. Hore, Ron Friedman
Authors discuss using historical settings for speculative fiction stories.

Messing with history is, of course, alternative history. Friedman developed his interest in AH because his Polish grandfather served on several fronts during WW2, and he wondered how Europe would have developed if some things had gone the other way.

Hore said he intended his first fantasy novel to have a purely fictitious setting so he wouldn't have to do historical research, but without realizing it at first, he ended up using known medieval history for a framework. He said he had too many historical researches to develop as novels. He sets his stories a century or so after a divergence so that he doesn't have to plot out the transition.

In the discussion period, a member of the audience mentioned anachronistic words that jar the reader out of a story as being a frequent problem in alternative history.

Cyberpunk and Social Order

Hayden Trenholm, Nowick Gray, Darusha Wehm, Ron Bender
Cyberpunk is all about addressing how societal technology advancements bring moral and social questions to light. In an age of realized megacorporations and vulnerable technologies, is cyberpunk going mainstream? This panel will address cyberpunk literature and societal crashes, both now and in the future.

Gray said the original cyberpunk has since been passed by because the world's technology is ahead of where cyberpunk was. Wehm remarked that the advent of the Internet triggered a crisis of imagination among cyberpunk authors because they couldn't think of anything new.

Bender defined modern cyberpunk as the story of the huge gap between those who can afford new technology and those who can't, and between those who know how to use it to their advantage and those who struggle with the software. This will increase inequality in society. Gray replied that it then forces people to accept personal responsibility to take action for themselves. Trenholm's definition of cyberpunk was the struggle to completely control communication networks and those who wanted no controls at all, both of which are unrealistic.



Spot the cyberpunk. Answers on a postcard, please.

The Nuts And Bolts.

“How To Give A Successful Book Signing At Chapters/Indigo”

Adam Dreece

In a room full of books, how do you get someone to notice yours? Or you standing next it? There is an art to public book signings. A veteran of many success book signings, author Adam Dreece share his experience.

Canada has only one chain bookstore. Chapters, Indigo, W.H. Smith, Coles, and Classic Books are brands all owned by Heather Reisman, who is gradually expanding their trinkets and gift shop sections as book sales decline. I have always wondered if book signings are any value in boosting sales. Certainly an author has to have a thick skin as customers walk by avoiding eye contact for fear that they will then have to acknowledge the lowly creature’s existence.

Dreece is a novelist who had a well-designed presentation based on his practical experience. He said it starts with “May I tell you about ...”. Use different approaches for different people, not a standard approach. There are different types of customers: in a rush, in for a specific purpose, time eaters, next dayers, and immediate sale (rarest). Practice your pitch so you know it by heart and do it automatically while focusing on people’s body language and listening to them

instead of yourself. Don’t evangelize and know when to shut up. Your book won’t be for everyone. No-nos are your phone (turn it off and put it away), your friends, ego, letting no sales get to you, and not learning from mistakes.

“Business Planning in the Digital Age for Authors”

Brenda C. Deeks

How do you pump up your brand while banging out your daily word count? How do you make decisions about social media and marketing commitments? How do you still find the time and energy to write the darn book? Given the demands of the digital publishing world, whether you pursue traditional publishing, the indie route, or a hybrid approach, authors must create a PLAN if they want to succeed with their writing as a career. Don't miss this chance to learn how.

A well-presented lecture by Deeks, who has both a business degree and several published novels. She noted that authors can no longer operate the way they used to. It is not as easy as uploading a manuscript to publishing Websites and sitting back while the royalties come pouring in. Facebook, Twitter, and a personal Website are compulsory to establish a brand. A brand is your promise to readers that they will enjoy your works.

Goals and planning must be specific, measurable, achievable, and have a timeline. Prioritize your schedule with family, day job, personal matters, and writing. Set aside a specific time for writing. Decide how much of the production work you want to do. You can hire others to do the work and save time but lose money, or do the work yourself and lose time but save money. It isn’t just the literary work; Websites need technical maintenance, and you need to know tax accounting.



Panels I Didn't Go To.

Convention-goers know that there will be panels opposite each other that you wanted to attend both but couldn't. There are also mildly interesting panels not worth the bother, and others of no interest whatsoever. In looking through the programme book, I noticed the following events but did not attend them.

“Are Vampires and Zombies Dead?”

Kai Kiriyama, Craig DiLouie, Aviva Bel'Harold, Scott Burtness

Have vampires and zombies outlived their market appeal? Or will they reign again with new and grittier tales? Find out what's popular in the horror genre, what's going to the grave (at least, for now), and what new terrors are appearing on the horizon.

Good riddance to bad rubbish, say I.

“The Strong Female Character”

Krista Wallace, Halli Lilburn, Karin Weekes, Patrick Weekes

The misunderstandings surrounding Strong Female Characters have started a trend of kick-ass female character, but as equally underdeveloped as their damsel-in-distress triggers. This panel will explore the real meaning of Strong Female Characters, developed and complex female characters with agency, along with where it's being done right, and where it's being done wrong.

Where's Emma Peel when you really need her?

“Writer's Toolkit: Tools and Notes for Crafting Your Novel”

Craig DiLouie

Writing is an art, but story building is sometimes compared to engineering. In this presentation, novelist Craig DiLouie provides tools writers can use to outline/plot, analyze pacing and intensity, develop scenes, create interesting characters, and other aspects of craft. Attendees will learn to apply these tools to create compelling fiction that attracts publishers and readers.

Would that it were that easy. It is a start for the tyro, but will not make you a star in the publishing firmament.

“Speaking / Reading skills: Tips for Using a Microphone”

Zoey Duncan (of ZEDS Comic Communication) and Eva Pea

What's the point of getting behind a microphone if you can't hold your

audience's attention? Zoey wants your presentation, readings and karaoke to be in the spotlight and her microphone skills (inspired by stand-up comedy experience) will get you set for a confident and engaging performance.

This panel should be compulsory for every published author who does convention panels or goes on a book tour.

Live Action Slush: Science Fiction Edition

Tony King (reader), Daniel Abraham, Sally Harding, Robert J. Sawyer, Ian Alexander Martin, Tod McCoy

Bring the 1st page of your manuscript to be anonymously read aloud and receive comments from our editors.

There were several Live Action Slush events, each for a different genre.

What Won't You Write?

Aviva Bel'Harold, Kai Kiriyama, Michael J. Martineck, Kay Stewart, Candace Jane Dorsey, Timothy Anderson

Charles Stross has said publicly that he won't write about children being harmed or exploited. Seanan McGuire refuses to write about female characters being raped. Many other writers have no-go topics. Panelists will discuss their personal choices for off-limits subject areas, and their reasons for the ban.

There still are some taboos in acceptable literature, and for good reason.

Epilogue.

All told, other than the hotel labyrinth, WWC 2015 was an excellent convention. After five years, it has definitely found its niche, a place where genre fiction readers can enjoy themselves. I have never believed that the size of a convention is the measure of its success. Fortunately Calgary has an annual comic con that diverts the overweight Sailor Moons and completist action-figure collectors to a place where they are much happier. I hope the WWC resists the temptation to start adding a video room, costume contest, or other events that don't belong in a literary event.

Next year's When Words Collide will be held August 12 to 14, 2016. Visit www.whenwordscollide.org for further information. It will also host the Aurora Awards, which are the annual Canadian SF and fantasy awards.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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

FROM: Lloyd Penney
Etobicoke, Ontario

2015-08-16

OPUNTIA #315: [Re: Stampede costuming] It took me a little while to learn the term cosplay, and how it was created in the mid-1980s, basically replacing the term hall costume. I can imagine around that time of the Stampede, it's a little tough to control your diet, what with all the food available, especially the pancakes. Costume convention indeed, especially the full-body mascot-style costumes.

[I didn't think of it until afterwards, but I suppose the mascots are furies.]

As I ride the subway to work, I see as many people reading paper books as I see reading e-books, but not as many as those reading the free transit newspapers. For the most part, if people are not reading, they are having short catnaps. I don't see as much recreational reading as I used to, and I am just as guilty. I need to get myself started again.

OPUNTIA #316: More great pictures. I seem to recall some of those SF stories with extremely dangerous plants, but they were mostly unsatisfying, mostly niche stories. Carnivorous plants were much like rooted vampires, not very dangerous, and easy to keep away from. Where I work, there's many potted plants, and now I've got everyone in the office calling them triffids.

Earlier this very day, we saw a local artist painting one of the utility boxes down the street. I hope the artwork stays. Our mayors here have a habit of seeing urban artwork like this as graffiti or simply vandalism.

[Calgary utilities (not the City, which does not own any of the boxes), in order to set quality standards, do not allow random painting. There have been cases where amateur artists had their work removed. Instead, the utilities pay artists who can demonstrate professional quality work. Another example is shown at right, at 16 Avenue NW and 4 Street, showing a sunset skyline.]



SEEN IN THE LITERATURE

Hardy, K., et al (2015) **The importance of dietary carbohydrate in human evolution.** QUARTERLY REVIEW OF BIOLOGY 90:251-268

Authors' abstract: *“We propose that plant foods containing high quantities of starch were essential for the evolution of the human phenotype during the Pleistocene. Although previous studies have highlighted a stone tool-mediated shift from primarily plant-based to primarily meat-based diets as critical in the development of the brain and other human traits, we argue that digestible carbohydrates were also necessary to accommodate the increased metabolic demands of a growing brain. Furthermore, we acknowledge the adaptive role cooking played in improving the digestibility and palatability of key carbohydrates. We provide evidence that cooked starch, a source of preformed glucose, greatly increased energy availability to human tissues with high glucose demands, such as the brain, red blood cells, and the developing fetus. We also highlight the auxiliary role copy number variation in the salivary amylase genes may have played in increasing the importance of starch in human evolution following the origins of cooking. Salivary amylases are largely ineffective on raw crystalline starch, but cooking substantially increases both their energy-yielding potential and glycemia. Although uncertainties remain regarding the antiquity of cooking and the origins of salivary amylase gene copy number variation, the hypothesis we present makes a testable prediction that these events are correlated.”*

Sigl, M., et al (2015) **Timing and climate forcing of volcanic eruptions for the past 2,500 years.** NATURE 523:543-562

Authors' abstract: *“Volcanic eruptions contribute to climate variability, but quantifying these contributions has been limited by inconsistencies in the timing of atmospheric volcanic aerosol loading determined from ice cores and subsequent cooling from climate proxies such as tree rings. Here we resolve these inconsistencies and show that large eruptions in the tropics and high latitudes were primary drivers of interannual-to-decadal temperature variability in the Northern Hemisphere during the past 2,500 years. Our results are based on new records of atmospheric aerosol loading developed from high-resolution, multi-parameter measurements from an array of Greenland and Antarctic ice cores as well as distinctive age markers to constrain chronologies. Overall,*

cooling was proportional to the magnitude of volcanic forcing and persisted for up to ten years after some of the largest eruptive episodes. Our revised timescale more firmly implicates volcanic eruptions as catalysts in the major sixth-century pandemics, famines, and socioeconomic disruptions in Eurasia and Mesoamerica while allowing multi-millennium quantification of climate response to volcanic forcing.”

Speirs: Take note of that last sentence. Our European ancestors were particularly helpless because they did not know that volcanos on the other side of the planet were causing their Little Ice Ages and crop failures. Today we would know the source of our misery, but if the crops fail, there still isn't a lot that could be done.

Phillips, T. (2015) **Human altruism and cooperation explainable as adaptations to past environments no longer fully evident in the modern world.** QUARTERLY REVIEW OF BIOLOGY 90:295-314

Author's abstract: *“Evolutionary theory predicts rigorous competition in nature and selfish behavior is thus seen as its inevitable consequence. Evidence of altruistic and cooperative behavior therefore appears at odds with evolutionary theory. However, evolutionary psychology suggests that past environments may be different from the current environments that humans inhabit. Here it is hypothesized that competition in two past environments might have led to strategies that favored altruism and cooperation toward non-kin. First, the expansion of the human brain is seen as requiring long-term, quality parental investment to sustain it. Altruistic displays could well have signaled an ability and willingness to provide such parental investment in a potential mate and been favored as a result. Second, the development of extra-somatic weapons is seen as leading to competition within hominin groups becoming more costly as disputes would have become lethal. A cooperative strategy could have achieved greater net fitness if the benefits of reduced involvement in such lethal disputes exceeded the costs of cooperation. Genes associated with human altruism and cooperation toward non-kin could thus have increased in frequency and come to be expressed in modern human populations despite the environments in which they evolved no longer being fully evident in the modern world.”*