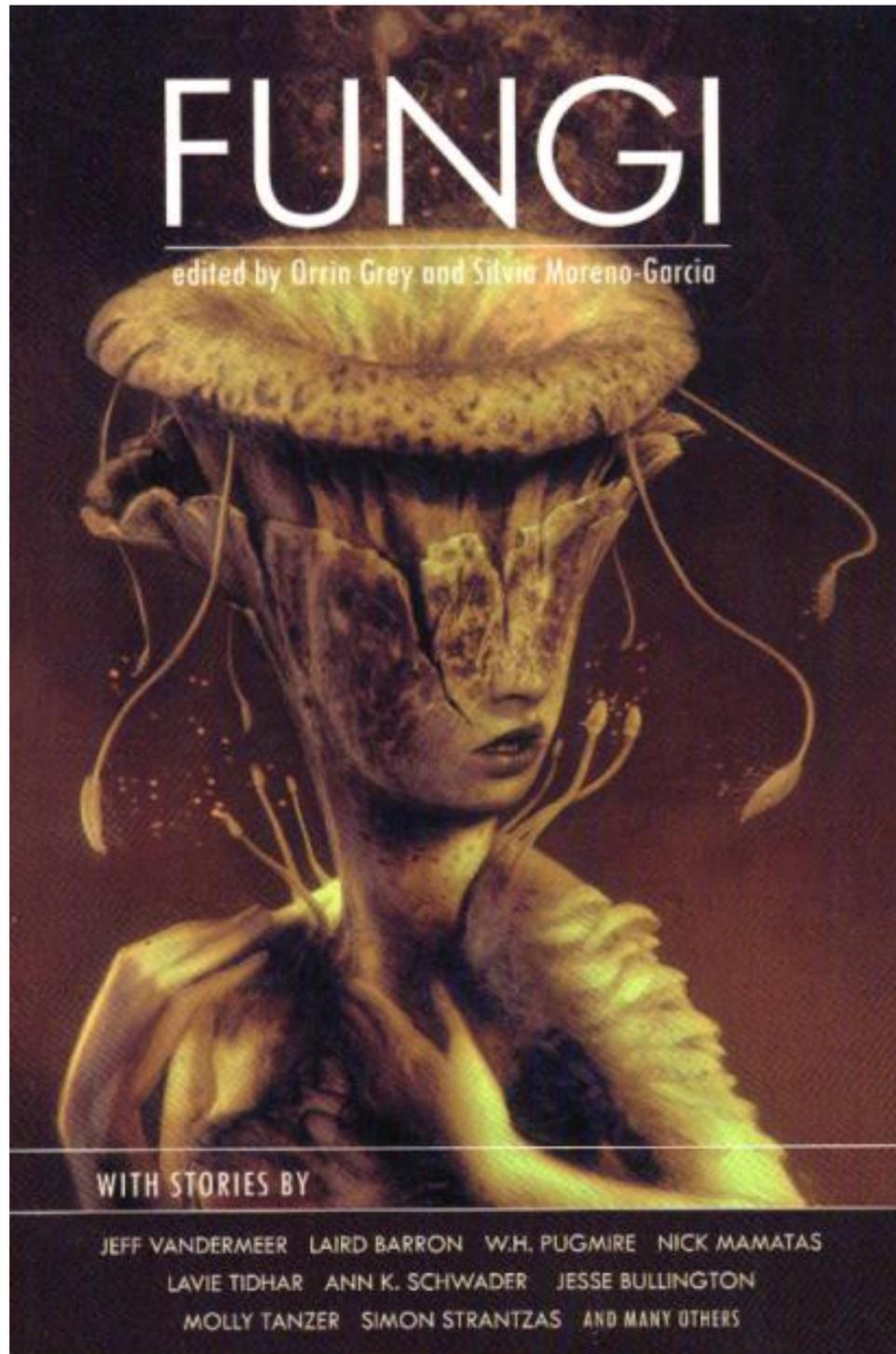


OBIR MAGAZINE

The Occasional Biased & Ignorant Review Magazine of Canadian Speculative Fiction
Dedicated to Promoting the Absurd Personal Literary Taste of R. Graeme Cameron
(Issue # 1 – April 2015)



FUNGI

edited by Arrin Grey and Silvia Moreno-Garcia

WITH STORIES BY

JEFF VANDERMEER LAIRD BARRON W.H. PUGMIRE NICK MAMATAS
LAVIE TIDHAR ANN K. SCHWADER JESSE BULLINGTON
MOLLY TANZER SIMON STRANTZAS AND MANY OTHERS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

03 – EDITORIAL

04 – REVIEWS

FUNGI ANTHOLOGY

- 05 – Hyphae – by *John Langdon*
05 – The White Hands – by *Lavie Tidhar*
05 – His Sweet Truffle of a Girl – by *Camille Alexa*
06 – Last Bloom on the Sage – by *Andrew Penn Romine*
06 – The Pilgrims of Parthen – by *Kristopher Reisz*
06 – Midnight Mushrumps – by *W.H. Pugmire*
06 – Kum Raul (The Unknown Terror) – by *Steve Berman*
07 – Corpse Mouth and Spore Nose – by *Jeff VanderMeer*
07 – Goatsbride – by *Richard Gavin*
08 – Tubby McMungus, Fat From Fungus – by *Molly Tanzer & Jesse Bullington*
08 – Wild Mushrooms – by *Jane Hertenstein*
08 – Our Stories Will Live Forever – by *Paul Tremblay*
09 – Where Dead Men Go to Dream – by *A.C. Wise*
09 – Dust From a Dark Flower – by *Daniel Mills*
09 – A Monster in the Midst – by *Julio Toro San Martin*
10 – The Pearl in the Oyster and the Oyster under Glass – by *Lisa M. Bradley*
10 – Letters to a Fungus – by *Polenth Blake*
10 – The Shaft Through the Middle of It All – by *Nick Mamatas*
11 – Go Home Again – by *Simon Strantzas*
11 – First They Came for the Pigs – by *Chadwick Ginther*
11 – Out of the Blue – by *Ian Rogers*
12 – Gamma – by *Laird Barron*
12 – Cordyceps Zombii – by *Ann K. Schwader*

LIGHTSPEED MAGAZINE

- 12 – A Face in Black Iron – by *Matthew Hughes*

FANTASY SCROLL MAGAZINE

- 13 – Dragonspit – by *William Meikle*
14 – A STRANGE MANUSCRIPT FOUND IN A COPPER CYLINDER – by *James de Mille*
15 – **MISSILE MISSIVES** – Apoplectic expletives from: *Marissa ‘Wendy’ Fisher, Tom Siple, Janet Ursel, Gregg Chamberlain, Felicity Pamela Walker, & Steve Fahnstalk.*
17 – **AFTERWORDS** – Final thoughts.

EDITORIAL

“You’re Crazy!” said my wife Alyx, “you do enough work as it is!”

Yep. Here I am starting up yet another fanzine. Sure sign of a faned (fan editor) addicted to fanac (fan activity). Bizarrely, this zine will interact with the real world, something fans like me normally avoid doing.

You see, I’ve been reading Canadian SpecFic lately, and it suddenly occurred to me it would be a fun idea to record my opinions about what I’ve read and share them as part of my CSFFA mandate to promote the Canadian SF&F genre in the pages of **Auroran Lights**, the newsletter of the Canadian SF&F Association (the Aurora Awards people).

Except I’m not going to record them in **Auroran Lights**. I’m going to write them up in the pages of OBIR instead. This way I and I alone will be responsible for the opinions presented and no one else can be blamed.

Mind you, I would not be adverse to other readers of Canadian SpecFic submitting reviews for inclusion. This would further my hidden agenda of promoting the genre. No pay unfortunately, as this is a perzine (personal fanzine) available free to anyone who wants to read it and consequently no money is harmed in the making of this zine. Would-be contributors please take note. You’ll be paid in what fans call egoboo (a boost to one’s ego), namely the thrill of sharing your views with others.

What others? I’ve been around fandom for over forty years and have accumulated in that time an unknown number of fellow fans who get a kick out of reading what I write. Or so I keep telling myself.

Meanwhile, I’ve also gained the acquaintance of a fair number of authors (some of them friends, only a few of them enemies) during the same decades. My recent activities in regard to **Auroran Lights** has brought me to the attention of even more professionals (hopefully none of them hit men). Chances are OBIR could develop into a reviewzine of some interest to more than a few professionals and fans, not least because it may introduce books, magazines, and authors to any readers previously unfamiliar with them.

OBIR may well serve a useful purpose, though certainly my own “talent” will have little to do with its popularity (if any). Still, I think we can all agree that more genre promotion is a good thing.

Of course, I have no credentials to speak of. I do have a UBC Bachelor of Fine Arts in Creative Writing but this must be contrasted with the fact I’ve never sold a short story or a novel. Besides, I’ve probably forgotten everything I ever learned. Getting older by the minute.

But, in the spirit of the Classic Pohl/Kornbluth SF story **The Marching Morons**, I do know what I like, and am willing to talk about it. No academic credentials. Just a guy who likes to read. The very thing Publishers and authors are looking for.

This first issue is a kind of “**proof of concept**” experiment. I chose **Fungi** because I’m a sucker for Lovecraftian-style fiction and figured I’d have no problem being motivated to read it all the way through. In this case the book came out in 2012, so out of date as far as Aurora Award considerations are concerned. In general, however, I hope to present at least some material every issue potentially appropriate to the following year’s Aurora Awards, as well as older fiction I’ve recently read.

I plan to publish whenever I can, which probably means every few months depending on how long it takes me to read through an anthology or a magazine or a few novels. No regular schedule, in other words. I’ll just pub my ish when I think I have enough material.

Being on a fixed pension income, I can't actually afford to buy many books (or even magazines) so I would welcome Canadian publishers sending me PDFs of books (especially anthologies) or magazines for review purposes. Likewise from Canadian authors, even if your story or book is published in another country.

Note that I won't be reviewing foreign authors unless their work is within a book or magazine published by a Canadian company. OBIR Magazine is dedicated to CANADIAN SpecFic.

PDFs can be sent to me at < [The Graeme](#) > I can't guarantee to review it in a timely manner, but I intend to make the effort.

I wouldn't send me a hardcopy if I were you, unless it fits within your advert budget. You might want to wait a while to see if OBIR generates any "buzz" or if it dies stillborn. No sense wasting money.

But if you absolutely insist, send me your book or magazine to:

R. Graeme Cameron
13315 104th Ave, Apt 72-G
Surrey, B.C. Canada
V3T 1V5

Once read, I'll pass it on to any local fan who wants to read it.

I prefer to think I'm going to have fun with OBIR. Hopefully my readers will too.

Please send me feedback! You can reach me at: < [The Graeme](#) >

Or my Twitter account: < [@rgraemecameron](#) >

And don't forget to check out my website < [Cdn. SF Zine Archive](#) > which is devoted to the history of Canadian SF Fandom and Fanzines!

REVIEWS

REVIEWING SYSTEM

- **Invigorating** = Really, really exciting. Eye-opening. Dance a jig time.
- **Great Fun** = Thoroughly enjoyed it. Ripping good yarn. Stimulating.
- **Entertaining** = Pleasing. Memorable. A good read. Worthwhile.
- **Interesting** = Something intriguing about it, but not enough to get me excited.
- **Not to my taste** = Doesn't appeal to me due to my personal prejudices.
- **Abysmal** = Waste of time for any number of reasons.

Note that with the exception of the “abysmal” rating my rating system doesn’t judge works on their intrinsic merit so much as how they run up against my personal preferences and prejudices. Readers should bear this in mind. I could be dead wrong about everything!

FUNGI Anthology – (2012) – Edited by *Orrin Grey* & *Silvia Moreno-Garcia* – < [Find it here](#) >

< [Innsmouth Free Press](#) > (Cdn Publisher)

Introduction: As noted in the editorial this anthology and its stories are not relevant for this or next year’s Aurora Awards. Only some of the authors are Canadian.

The editors begin with an overview of traditional Fungi lit and film (even mentioning **Attack of the Mushroom People!**) and conclude the volume with an excellent list of Fungal Fiction. How cool is that?

Contents:

Hyphae – by *John Langdon*

Premise: Dutiful son James reluctantly checks out the country house old dad refuses to leave.

This is a classic Lovecraft-style weird tale in that the reader is always one step ahead of the antagonist in anticipating a growing dread and horror. Jame’s character is sufficiently well drawn with small details to enable the reader to empathize. What he discovers is predictable (as per tradition with this sort of story), but the author resolves the problem quite deftly with an original touch. Well done.

Rating: **Entertaining**. Very satisfying because it fits canon like a glove.

The White Hands – by *Lavie Tidhar*

Premise: Excerpts from a history of a world both human and fungoid.

Really a “what if?” scenario where human explorers come in contact with sentient fungi and the centuries of conflict (sometimes between fungi) which subsequently erupts. Certainly human/fungi love affairs complicate dynastic planning, and the HUMAN-FUNGI Accord of 945 A.F. is rather nifty. Fragments of history.

Rating: **Interesting**. Some of the details and ideas I liked, but overall it struck me as more like background notes for a book or a TV series than a story. Granted, somewhat in the Olof Stapledon tradition of the grand sweep of history, but it felt incomplete. Nevertheless conjures up interesting visions.

His Sweet Truffle of a Girl – by *Camille Alexa* (Cdn/US dual)

Premise: A most unusual submarine in a unique predicament.

A submariner in... let’s say a biological submarine, pines over a daguerreotype of his lover. As things go from bad to worse, he fears he will never see her again. A creature of the stygian deep threatens. There is but one slim chance of survival. Dare he take it?

Rating: **Great fun**. The “environment” of the submarine is rendered quite credible due to the author’s attention to detail over its workings. For me that stands out over and above the plot or the characters. Definitely an “idea” piece, albeit one that manages to present an authentic fungoid mood. Found it fascinating.

Last Bloom on the Sage – by *Andrew Penn Romine*

Premise: In a world gone eldritch two cowboys (one not human) plot to stop a mystic train.

Two cowboys attack a train to rescue a prisoner. The latter happens to be an evil disembodied brain. One of the former, Legs McGraw, has no legs at all but rather “*tentacles squidging trails of slime,*” tentacles “*with the pungent tang of rotting mushrooms.*” Apart from that, he is very companionable. The other, Duke Winchester, is armed with Colt Hexmakers.

Rating: Great fun. All that is weird is in fact perfectly normal to the inhabitants of this alternate Wild West, but makes for unexpected and zany dynamics for the reader. I quite enjoyed it. Over the top the way I like it.

The Pilgrims of Parthen – by *Kristopher Reisz*

Premise: Hallucinogenic visions a gateway to somewhere else.

Everyone consuming the mushrooms gets to explore a shared alien world. Like a video game there are save points from which you can start the next time you get high. So, amusingly, social media is alive with instructions from people further along in the quest telling others where to go. They leap frog each other in an effort to discover the secret of the otherworld. The unlucky ones find out what it is.

Rating: Entertaining. I’m assuming some sort of metaphor for drug addiction and alienation but I’m too dense to grasp the subtle underpinnings, preferring instead to wallow in growing anticipation of what will be discovered. Takes a while, a bit slow may haps, but I came away satisfied.

Midnight Mushrumps – by *W.H. Pugmire*

Premise: Ritual sculpture within a bed of fungus a bad idea.

I don’t even know how to explain the basic plot of this story. Can’t wrap my brain around it.

Rating: Not to my taste. This is a sort of surreal fairytale and a grim one at that. It is without doubt a mood piece, and good at conveying the mood, but I found myself confused over the precise nature of the mood intended, not to mention unable to figure out exactly what was happening. My “wtf?” confusion kept pulling me out of the story. Likewise the lengthy paragraphs which I found annoying. I’ve become intellectually lazy over the years and suspect I’m not doing the story justice. I feel it is carefully crafted to achieve a particular artistic goal, but it reminds me of the avant-garde student films I walked out of at University. Others with different tastes may conclude this is the best story in the anthology, but not I. Did like the title though.

Kum Raul (The Unknown Terror) – by *Steve Berman*

Premise: The price of studying fungi in a Mayan cave.

Rating: Interesting. Because I have taken a number of courses on Mesoamerican studies, including an academic tour of Mayan and Aztec ruins in three countries, I came away a trifle disappointed at the limited use of the Mayan aspect. Also can’t help but wonder if this story was inspired by the Mario Bava film **Caltiki, the Immortal Monster**. But my musings aside, the main flaw is that the story is all tell rather than show, almost as if it is a synopsis of a movie script, which, since it is an excerpt from the author’s **Guide to Lost Gay Cinematic Characters**, it probably is. Then again, perhaps the guide is fictional, being a riff on the type of Gay characters which COULD have existed in films of Yore. That would make it highly original. I have no idea.

Overall, the film sounds rather dull, a low-grade B movie without redeeming features, or at least none indicated. So why do I find this interesting? Always a sucker for dangerous fungi lurking in a cave.

Corpse Mouth and Spore Nose – by *Jeff VanderMeer*

Premise: Not easy being a detective in Mushroom city.

A persistent, indeed obsessive-minded no-name detective emerges from a river (likes to swim apparently) on to the foreshore of an abandoned city. Quite close by he comes across a rather extraordinary recumbent form. What you might call a life-changing event happens, his original quest immediately forgotten. And yet, successful in a way.

*Rating: **Interesting**.* I like this because it speaks to my taste. It takes place on familiar territory, namely a Lovecraftian nightmare of rot and infection. The description is quite good and accessible. I get what is happening (almost) though I don't understand the why of it. Much of the symbolism skips by me but I don't mind because the setting is memorable, the situation horrible. A bit more clarity would help, or at least help me. I need a lot of help.

Let me take a stab at interpreting the symbolism. Crawling out of a dark river. Could be he's just crawling out of a river like it says. Or it might be the river Styx and he's emerging into some sort of afterlife. Or perhaps he is "awakening" into a dream state, a nightmare. Or possibly he's been dead and been restored to life in a now diseased world. Maybe he is hallucinating while sitting in a dentist's chair. I don't know. Maybe he tried to commit suicide by throwing himself into the river and we are experiencing his death visions. Then again, maybe he's just pulling himself out of a river in order to look for somebody. I believe writers hate readers like me.

When you consider I was the only one in High School English Lit class to consider Thomas Hardy's **The Mayor of Castlebridge** an extraordinarily witty and hilarious satire of English life you may possibly grasp how authentic a critic I am...

Goatsbride – by *Richard Gavin (Cdn - Ontario)*

Premise: Faithful to the old religion.

At first sight a swansong to pagan beliefs, demeaned and diminished by the new religion, seemingly on the verge of extinction. But those of you familiar with Sir James Frazer's **The Golden Bough** will know what happens next.

*Rating: **Entertaining**.* So much that is written about traditional European paganism reeks of disapproval and anti-pagan propaganda. This story is refreshingly different. It successfully captures the raw power and majesty of ancient perception of the divine from a point of view within said belief system, and I don't mean a light-hearted New Age approach either. It's a very visceral blast from the past. The ending, if a trifle ambiguous, is quite impressive.

Contrary to what many moderns believe, the old pagans were not superstitious idiots. There was a breadth of concept which appealed to the imagination, especially on an emotional plane, a vision of sacred wisdom which convinced believers they were in communion with the gods of nature on a very personal level indeed. This story captures that sense magnificently. Nothing disrespectful here.

Not that I advocate the old religion. I'm an atheist. But I do like to see religion, any religion, being portrayed in fiction authentic to the actual beliefs of the faithful. Otherwise why bother?

Tubby McMungus, Fat From Fungus – by *Molly Tanzer & Jesse Bullington*

Premise: Anthropomorphous cats are an exercise in dangerous greed and one-upmanship.

Tubby makes a good living designing and selling Merkins (also known as “dick wigs”) to the court of Chester II, only to discover the products of Seignior Chiazza have become all the rage. He must come up with the ultimate Merkin in time for the annual “Mad Menagerie” at court.

Rating: **Not to my taste.** Which is odd. **Wind in the Willows** is one of a select few favourite books (Wells’ **War of the Worlds** another) which I reread every year. I believe I own all of H. Beam Piper’s **Little Fuzzy** series. And who doesn’t like the feisty Ewoks?

Yet the fact remains I find most humans-in-animal-form characters not very convincing or satisfying. Why cats? Why not aardvarks? Or baboons? Or even human beings?

A case can be made that cats, being notoriously self-conscious easily offended egotists, are perfect for the plot of this story, but I didn’t “buy it” enough to settle in. After all, Tubby McMungus is a jerk (of course he is, he’s a cat!) and I felt little empathy for his character. Miss Mousha, his hardworking ratty seamstress, was far more sympathetic from my perspective, but little use is made of her.

I do admit the story has an authentic fairy tale “feel,” a sprightly jesting tone almost Chaucerian in nature, so I assume people who like this sort of thing will find it quite delightful. I, however, curmudgeonly cold-to-fantasy sci-fi geek that I am, was left standing awkwardly at the threshold, peering past a half-open door without any ability to relate to what I was seeing. I don’t think the gossipy bats in the story would approve of me. Nor fantasy fans.

Wild Mushrooms – by *Jane Hertenstein*

Premise: An old world obsession with mushroom picking.

Basically an auto-biographical piece, perhaps partly or even wholly fictional, musing on the influence of parents from the old country who persist in the habit of picking wild mushrooms, not for the usual dignified scramble for hallucinogens reasons, but simply to add to the table. No wonder their daughter, who doesn’t even like mushrooms, finds this wildly embarrassing. One of those “Oh my god, my family” things.

Rating: **Not to my taste.** It is a slice of life piece. Not unexpected, given that the author teaches a “Flash Memoir” course. It is well done, and even I can appreciate the nostalgia, but it’s not really a “horror tale” and seems out of place. Except that, despite hints of Salvador Dali’s Paranoiac Critical Method (don’t ask me to explain—suffice to say I got an excellent mark for a University term paper interpreting D.H. Lawrence’s writing techniques in light of Dali’s theory...), it stands in sober contrast to the rest of the stories in the anthology. I strongly suspect selected for that very reason (plus the quality of writing). It’s just not the sort of thing I am personally interested in. Nothing wrong with the story. Maybe something wrong with me.

Our Stories Will Live Forever – by *Paul Tremblay*

Premise: What can a dreaded horror offer you in an emergency?

If you possess even the slightest phobic fear regarding flying about in gigantic commercial airliners, do NOT read this story! Can hardly say anything about the plot without giving away the ending (something I

scrupulously attempt to avoid doing in these reviews) so let's just say the weird person sitting next to you in flight may turn out to be a lot weirder than you think.

*Rating: **Entertaining.*** I rate it this way, even though it made me cringe. Repeatedly. The ending is curiously satisfying though. Something I would do, given the choice. Once YOU have read the story and considered my reaction to it you may possibly begin to look at me sideways.

Where Dead Men Go to Dream – by *A.C. Wise* (Cdn born - Philadelphia)

Premise: As best I can make out, a rather depressed young man is seeking a way to communicate with his dead girlfriend in order to apologize for unintentionally driving her to suicide.

That the young man is named Jonah is a bit of a giveaway. Reading this I don't experience a smooth narrative drive so much as a jangled kaleidoscope of vividly captured moments, like looking at a handful of mirror shards each depicting an isolated image from a shattered mosaic. For me the story flashes like a strobe light. The emphasis is not on the plot but on Jonah's disturbed and obsessive state of mind.

*Rating: **Not to my taste.*** At all. The story is riddled with angst. I hate angst. I suffered from extreme depression off and on for more than thirty years (extreme to the extent where a depression clinic at UBC refused to treat me on the grounds they only wanted to deal with patients who had some chance of being cured) and, having reached a stage in my life where I am actually enjoying life, I'm bugged if I want to revisit the atmosphere of regrets and remorse over failed opportunities that used to fog my brain.

Which is to say that the story, despite its "weird fiction" aspect, is psychologically acute and accurate to the point of being painful to a former sufferer like me. Any writer interested into gaining insight into the physiological reality of a character in this condition would do well to read this story.

You might think "Nah, this is unrealistic. Nobody thinks like this. It's made-up pseudo-intellectual B.S." I beg to differ. This story hits home, hits hard, for anyone who's lived through episodes like this.

Well done, in other words. Powerful and effective.

Dust From a Dark Flower – by *Daniel Mills*

Premise: The New Hampshire village of Falmouth buries its deceased Reverend in 1767. He is soon replaced by a Reverend Judah Stone who brings "*imperturbable mildness and good humour*" to his task. That is not all he brings...

Couple of particularly good things about this story. First, it's relentless pace and momentum slowly builds an overwhelmingly oppressive atmosphere of dread and apprehension as one unsettling discovery after another is revealed. Second, in style and choice of words it reads very much like something penned in the historical period it is set in. This adds immensely to the credibility of the tale.

*Rating: **Entertaining.*** I do believe Lovecraft would have enjoyed it. Very much in canon.

A Monster in the Midst – by *Julio Toro San Martin* (Cdn - Toronto)

Premise: Green slime mold has covered much of the Earth in the age of King Louis and Queen Marie Antoinette. The Vicomte Triste leads an expedition of aerostats to a point in the Atlantic where his clockwork man (which he invented) tells him to drop into the sea in a submarine (also of the Vicomte's invention) to

confront the horror at the centre of the contagion, potentially a bad idea it turns out. Seems the Vicomte has not thought things through.

A touch of steampunk, a liberal spread of unspeakable horror, and a character whose thoughtless heroics and unjustified confidence faithfully reflect the mindset of the nobility in the historical reality of the period; what's not to like? Not what I would call "serious" horror, being rather light-hearted in nature, without much solid substance, but definitely a good read.

*Rating: **Entertaining.*** This sort of story cheers me up and makes me chuckle. I repeat, not for you to question my sanity...

The Pearl in the Oyster and the Oyster under Glass – by *Lisa M. Bradley*

Premise: Two environmentalists, one part bear and part man, the other a "mixed-skin" woman (literally mixed-skin, her body covered with multiple skin grafts) interrelate at an Oceanside oil spill where booms impregnated with oil-eating mushrooms are deployed to purify the water.

I can't tell if the part bear/part man aspect is an allegorical interpretation of both man's relationship with and alienation from mother nature, or if he's actually a hybrid creature. I assume the mixed skin woman is symbolic of something as well, or maybe not. The fact that their interaction with each other leads to nothing annoys me. As does the ending, which I won't divulge, but the point seems to be that everything is pointless, yet there's always hope, maybe.

*Rating: **Not to my taste.*** I don't get it. I don't get it at all. Rather than a coherent story where characters are set up with some sort of explanation and the problem at hand is resolved or at least evolved through the main character's effort successfully or not, this is more of a mood piece where everything is what it is and nothing matters. Too existential for my taste. Nothing solid enough for me to sink my teeth into. I'm completely lost in a story like this.

I don't understand the title either. It's a nifty title, but I don't know what it means.

Nothing wrong with the writing. Some very good description for instance. I just don't understand what it's all about. Guess I'm just dense. I'm not the first to make that suggestion. Oh well.

Letters to a Fungus – by *Polenth Blake*

Premise: Incensed with the spread of sometimes deadly fungus over her property, Jane dashes off angry letters of complaint to the fungus. Unfortunately the fungus writes back.

I'm sure the situation is an allegory for something or other, maybe even a parable, but I just set my brain to idle and let the story wash over me. Like so many short shorts, despite a silly premise, or maybe precisely because of the silly premise, it is a quick and fun read.

*Rating: **Entertaining.*** Not a "real" horror piece, but a bright, almost cheerful bit of horror. The fungus is really quite insolent. A bit selfish too.

The Shaft Through the Middle of It All – by *Nick Ma matus*

Premise: Jochim's mother maintains a garden in a very special way. Then developers build a condo tower in its place, soon filled with prosperous newcomers. Jochim's mother has something special for them too.

Call it a revenge fantasy. Or a warning that modern up-to-date hip-and-with-it people shouldn't mess with old-fashioned women. They may be much more old-fashioned than you think. Dangerously old-fashioned.

A rather neat aspect of this story is that the POV character takes everything his mother dishes out for granted. After all, he grew up with her vision of normalcy. Doesn't occur to him to see things differently. Sort of a survival skill actually. Allows him to remain placid in circumstances that would probably drive so-called normal people to the brink of insanity, or at least apoplexy.

*Rating: **Interesting.*** Something about the setting (tenements in New York's East Village district) didn't quite capture me or draw me into the story, maybe because it wasn't quite Lovecraftian enough to my mind, or perhaps because I kept expecting Jack Kerouac to wander through (never mind why), so I sort of kept outside the story somehow. But a good, creepy story nonetheless.

Go Home Again – by *Simon Strantzas* (Cdn – Toronto)

Premise: A young woman returns to her mold-encrusted family home seeking some sense of why first her father and then her mother abandoned her as a child. Confronting one's past, or the remaining evidence of it, can be difficult indeed.

The past, for most people it seems, constitutes a sort of painful baggage one is forever trying to let go of yet seldom succeeds in getting rid of. The horror of it can only grow worse with time. Confronting it face-to-face is the solution, or so Freud would say. Maybe. Maybe not.

*Rating: **Interesting.*** There be angst here too, though more in the nature of a quest than self-perpetuating misery, so easier for me to read. Plus the evocative description of the state of the house and what lay within it made me want to keep reading. The ending, on the other hand, didn't quite appeal to my taste, left me feeling a bit disappointed. However the ending makes sense and the story works as a seamless whole, so I'm just being persnickety. Did enjoy the atmosphere quite a bit.

First They Came for the Pigs – by *Chadwick Ginther* (Cdn – Winnipeg)

Premise: A wealthy merchant hires four "gifted" mercenaries to help him drag the mushroom infested body of his household steward through the undercity to the Vile Truffle, a sort of Fungi deity, who wants its children (the mushrooms) back or else. Can the mercenaries be trusted?

There is a sort of Thief of Bagdad/Sinbad/Arabian Nights cheekiness present in this story set in a timeless/placeless fantasy world. The premise itself is absurdly cheeky. This is not something you take seriously, but rather something you decide to accept and simply go with the flow to where it carries you.

*Rating: **Entertaining.*** In a certain sense the choice of characters and even the place names are purely arbitrary and devoid of background, but it doesn't matter. Normally it would, but in this case, not necessary. Bit of a jape really, not much more than that, but cheerfully pleasing.

Excellent title by the way.

Out of the Blue – by *Ian Rogers* (Cdn – Peterborough)

Premise: A real estate agent specializing in haunted properties calls his detective buddy in the middle of the night to help him find out if something bad has happened to a young woman he hired to redecorate a weird country house with a history of driving its occupants murderously insane.

Hey! The house is located near Barrie, Ontario, the town I was born in. Of course I want to read this.

Nothing symbolic or allegorical here. Just a straightforward what-the-heck-is-going-on tale with a suitably shambling menace. Easy and quick to read, with the foolishly over-confident detective a study in contrast to the worrywart real estate agent. With a bit of cheeky humour thrown in, something you know I like to see.

Rating: **Entertaining.** Nothing New Wave here, but rather an old-fashioned piece reminiscent of E.C. horror comic tales. I'm okay with that. I like this sort of thing.

Gamma – by *Laird Barron*

Premise: A dead horse can be a deadly thing, especially when combined with a primordial life form dedicated to a rather lopsided symbiotic relationship.

The location jumps around quite a bit, both in space and time. Nevertheless the story is a linear progression with a simple message: nature and science don't always combine to our advantage. Given cited examples found in nature, one cannot smugly dismiss this tale. Disturbingly credible, but only if...

Rating: **Entertaining.** The author takes a good concept and runs with it. A little bit of angst, but not enough to bother me. Snappy ending. Quite satisfying.

Cordyceps Zombii – by *Ann K. Schwader*

Premise: We don't discover alien life. It discovers us. Spores rain down upon the Earth.

We may be as advanced as we think we are. Not that that does us any good... but at least the spores were pretty when they came twinkling down the night sky.

Rating: **Interesting.** Not a story. A poem. I'm not much good at judging poems. This one as creepy as any of the stories within this volume. Perhaps an allegory concerning the inevitability of death for every living individual. Darned if I know.

I was never much good at writing poems either. I vaguely recall as a young teenager writing a poem about contemplating infinity while standing on a giant mushroom. All I remember is the last line:

“Stupid mushroom had collapsed.”

Perhaps it is just as well I didn't wind up being Canada's Poet Laureate.

Fungi Worth Reading? Oh hell yeah. Really enjoyed it.

LIGHTSPEED MAGAZINE (#58) – April 2015 – [Lightspeed Mag](#)

A Face of Black Iron – by *Mathew Hughes* (Cdn)

Premise: Two Wizards, a dragon, a groffet and a henchman named Erm Kaslo prepare to enter the seventh plane of the multiverse to confront “whatever survivor of the Nineteenth Aeon Wizard's cabal” is waiting to destroy them.

The two wizards make their plans. Kaslo makes a suggestion which is not taken seriously. The dragon carries everyone in a conveyance to the floor of a vast crater where the two wizards manifest a whimsy into the seventh plane. There it is intimated the preparations of the enemy are superior to their own. Indeed, Kaslo has cause to regret participating in their quest.

*Rating: **Entertaining.*** This is not a stand-alone story, unless it be some kind of surreal existentialist fantasy overwhelmed by incomprehensible and meaningless detail.

But it isn't.

It is part of an ongoing series of stories in which the reader is expected, having begun at the beginning, to already possess situational awareness and a comfort level appropriate to the numerous no-doubt previously explained terms and references abundant in this particular "chapter." Having figured that out, I reread the story to see if I could make sense of it. In so doing I gained an impression of a rich and diverse greater whole that merits further investigation. Especially for a guy like me normally immune to the attraction of fantasy.

First of all, the dragon used to be a spaceship. THAT piqued my interest. Turns out "reality" used to be what we are accustomed to, but then everything shifted (somehow) into a state where sympathetic magic has largely replaced the laws of physics. Apparently at least one of the wizards had seen this coming and had gone to great lengths to convince people to abandon technology-based civilization for a somewhat medieval life-style, this in order to ensure humanity would survive the transition, which it did. I have the impression the wizards haven't quite got the hang of things yet and, like everybody else, are still learning to cope and adapt as matters progress. Lots of possibilities in a premise like this.

Possibilities for humour, for one thing, which Hughes playfully exploits. Not least in Kaslo's constant search for explanations as to what the heck is going on, and the subtle yet quite disturbingly suggestive partial answers he receives or discovers which are far from reassuring. Little annoying things, like the moon having been destroyed as an unexpected side-effect of inter-planer travel. Some people miss moonlight it seems. Fortunately there are magical alternatives to light one's way, but it's not the same somehow.

Possibilities for horror, too. The manner in which various threats manifest themselves, at least in this particular "episode," puts me in mind of William Hope Hodgson's **The Night Land**, that early classic of macabre fantasy which Lovecraft greatly admired. Same sense of unending assault by forces beyond imagination and comprehension. Quite unsettling, actually.

I feel I have caught but a glimpse of what appears to be an ongoing fantasy epic, one I would need to explore and understand further in order to arrive at a better and more involved relationship with what I am reading. But I am definitely intrigued.

This is actually the first piece of fiction by Hughes that I've read. (I've been out of touch with most modern SpecFic/fantasy for over two decades—trying to catch up I swear!) Intend to read more.

FANTASY SCROLL MAGAZINE (#4) – December 2014 – [Fantasy Scroll Mag](#)

Dragonspit – by *William Meikle* (Cdn = Scot living in Canada)

Premise: A simple tweet escalates into the mother of all flame wars.

In essence a whimsical idea goes viral, spawning controversy, then photo spoofs, fake videos, a dance craze, and finally something much worse.

*Rating: **Great fun.*** A short-short with a nifty premise spoofing how quickly social media can spiral out of control into something less than beneficial to humanity, especially when humans aren't the only beings with access to the web. An ultimately grim satire nevertheless suffused with enough humour to make me smile. I like it.

A STRANGE MANUSCRIPT FOUND IN A COPPER CYLINDER – *James de Mille (Cdn)*

Reviewed by R. Graeme Cameron – (reprinted from Auroran Lights #11)

First published posthumously in 1888, this seminal Canadian novel owes nothing to the writings of Haggard and Jules Verne which appeared after De Mille's death in 1880. A satirical utopia to be sure, it was probably inspired by such books as Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*, and perhaps even the essays of Lucian, the second century Roman satirist. Then again, maybe it was the product of delirium tremens, or an opiate dream, or, dare I say, a wonderful imagination?

February, 1850, Lord Featherstone's yacht lies becalmed near the Canaries. His fellow upper-class inebriates hit upon the idea of a paper-boat race toward an object bobbing up and down in the calm waters of the ocean. Said object turns out to be a metal cylinder.

"It looks like a can of preserved meat," said the doctor.

"It's my belief," said Featherstone, "that it is part of the provisions laid in by Noah for his long voyage in the ark. So come, let's open it, and see what sort of diet the antediluvians had."

Unsurprisingly, given the title of the book, the contents consist of a manuscript written by a Mr. Adam More (name implies what, the next stage of man's development?) eager to share word of his discovery of "a land from which escape is as impossible as from the grave."

Bored out of their skulls, and eager for a diversion, the yacht passengers settle down to take turns reading aloud to reveal the following tale:

Accidentally rowing to the South Pole (long story) Adam and his companion notice the obligatory primitive savages on the shore.

"Shall we land?" said Andrew.

"Oh, no," said I. "Don't be hasty. The elements are sometimes kinder than men, and I feel safer here, even in this river of death, than ashore with such creatures as those."

Of course they land. Andrew dies, possibly to be eaten, and Adam carries on the voyage posthaste. Swept through a gigantic cave, Adam emerges into a vast sea surrounded by mountains and a civilization of sorts.

"I was in a city built on the slope of a mountain, with its streets formed thus of successive terraces... one half of its habitations consisting of caverns, while the other half were pavilions and massive stone structures."

The second contact with the locals is more promising.

“I was left alone with the beautiful Almah, who herself showed the utmost graciousness and the kindest interest in me.”

Perilously close to Utopia? Alas, not.

“So it is with me,” said I. “In my country we call death the King of Terrors.”

“Here” said Almah, “they call death the Lord of Joy.”

Adam discovers the truth underlying her words and emotes in a manner that later inspired Joseph Conrad (not to mention Francis Ford Coppola).

“Oh horror, horror, horror! Oh, hideous abomination and deed without a name! I could not speak. I caught her in my arms, and we both wept passionately.”

You’ll be glad to know the yacht passengers found this excruciatingly entertaining.

MISSILE MISSIVES

The very day I conceived of this zine (speaking of “hideous abominations”) I worked up a cover and posted it on Facebook with the following text:

“Proof that I am crazy: contemplating starting a new fanzine to be titled ‘OBIR Magazine,’ the Occasional Biased & Ignorant Reviewzine of Canadian Speculative Fiction, Dedicated to Promoting the Absurd Personal Literary Taste of R. Graeme Cameron.

Working on a ‘proof of concept’ first issue wherein I review the FUNGI anthology published by Innsmouth Free Press in 2012. Should be out within a month. You have been warned. I invite your comments questioning my sanity.

Note that ‘OBIR Magazine’ will be free to anyone interested in reading it.”

This led to the following comments which I treat as Locs (letters of comment):

From: Marissa ‘Wendy’ Fischer – (April 1/2015)

April Fools?

(**The Graeme** – *Oddly enough, no.*)

From: Tom Siple – (April 1/2015)

Nothing biased about making noise where it otherwise wouldn't be heard when up against major marketing biased. Aka greed. Such is life. Good for you.

(The Graeme – *Uhhh. It IS odd that major American publishers tend to go bananas pushing authors they KNOW will sell well, and tend to limit publicity for authors yet to establish a readership (who need publicity most), but it makes business sense in a highly competitive and often not very lucrative business. These days profit margins are often so narrow that even midlist authors suffer from bean counter restraint on the part of publishers, or such is my impression. Which is why the vast majority of authors are left to their own devices as far as “pushing” their book goes. Indeed, some publishers demand their authors do this in lieu of doing it for them, or so I’ve heard. (What am I? A gossip sponge?)*

However, it strikes me most Canadian SF&F publishers are small specialty houses whose very existence depends on promoting ALL their authors. Any self-promotion on the part of authors tends to add to an existing publicity campaign rather than substitute for one. A much better symbiotic relationship methinks.

And then there’re self-published authors who are entirely dependent on their own promotional schemes. Challenging, to say the least.

I think back to the words of the ground-breaking novelist Henry Miller who once wrote, back in the fifties, something to the effect “I don’t worry about publicity. I just write books and send them to my publishers. I let them do all the worrying. Nothing further for me to do but cash their cheques.” Ah. Them be the days...

Anyway, hideously amateur as OBIR is, and utterly bereft of academic qualifications (not to mention critical acuity), I figure it can’t hurt to add to the discussion on Canadian SF&F genre literature, unless the consensus becomes that I’m ruining its reputation and must be stopped lest I destroy it entirely, in which case I will carry on if only to ensure I will be remembered and cursed long after I’m gone. If I can’t be the best critic around, might as well aim for being the worst...)

From: Janet Ursel – (April 1/2015)

There are forms of insanity I approve of...

(The Graeme – *Hopefully no one will try to cure me...*)

And, after I posted my rating system:

Janet – I like your rating system...

(The Graeme – *An honest rating system I like to think, in that it is avowedly purely subjective and makes no pretense of Olympian objectivity.)*

From: Gregg Chamberlain – (April 1/2015)

Huh... interesting... for sure put me on the subscription list.

(The Graeme – *Will do! I am open to reviews written by others by the way.)*

Gregg – I might be able to help out there... uh... there any “age” limit on the items reviewed?

(The Graeme – *My hidden agenda is to bring attention to Canadian authors and books potentially eligible for Auroras next year, so a certain amount of current year items reviewed is needed. On the other hand, want to celebrate all literary achievements past and present, if only to encourage contemporary readers to check out the genre’s heritage. So no age limit. As long as the subject reviewed is Canadian.)*

Gregg – Cool... couple short-story webzines I am subscribed to may provide me with some potential review content, as long as the author bio states where the person lives.... what about author interviews?

(**The Graeme** – *Sure. Always a good thing.*)

From: *Felicity Pamela Walker* – (April 2/2015)

I like the use of Chiller as the title font—unifies the zine masthead nicely with “Auroran Lights”!

(**The Graeme** – *I like Chiller font because it brings out the "rebel" in me, rather like Perry Como wearing a different colour sweater than he normally wears. it's so "free form" compared to my favourite font Times Roman. Even more radical, the title is in bold face. Will no one stop my typographical rampage?)*

From: *Steve Fahnstalk* – (April 2/2015)

Who's the cover by, Graeme? 'Snice. Sign me up, dude.

(**The Graeme** – *The beautiful FUNGI cover is by Oliver Wetter, a German commercial artist who also does fantasy art. From the examples I've seen this is one of his most striking images. He's quite good. I should note the OBIR cover image is very low res. The actual book cover is even more striking. And, for sure, will send you the "Proof of concept" first issue as soon as it is done.*)

AFTERWORDS

So, first issue done. I could have waited longer, added more material, but the Creative Ink Festival in Burnaby B.C. is coming up this weekend and I wanted at least some of the participants to have already read or at least glimpsed this zine so they'd know what I'm talking about when I buttonhole them to promote it.

I will also be promoting **Auroran Lights**, the newsletter I do for CSFFA, the Aurora Awards people. It, too, is dedicated to promoting Canadian SpecFic (indeed, the Canadian SF&F genre in general).

Does Canadian SpecFicLit NEED promotion? Or more specifically, need MY promotion efforts? Initial response I received when I first floated the idea for OBIR indicated some people think it is awfully presumptuous on my part, as if I'm setting up myself as some sort of respected doyen of critics, parading as such, pretending to be such. Who am I to do such a thing?

Well, nobody really. Just a reader.

I'm sure a gazillion readers post their reviews on the web. Several sites with multiple postings by multiple reviewers have been pointed out to me. But I find them a bit frantic and confusing, not to mention overwhelming. Each reviewer gets reduced to a statistic. 70% of reviewers favour this book, so it must be good. That sort of thing.

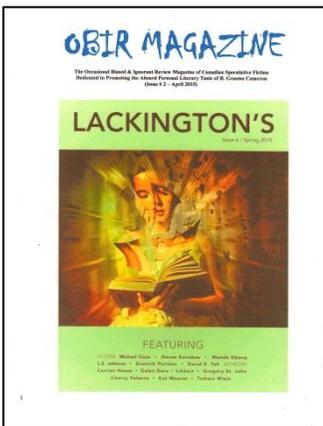
But I am fanzine orientated. I like a slow and easy pace plugging along until I feel I am ready to publish. I like a defined discreet product, an “issue” one can read from start to finish, or ignore completely. Nobody will rush past my reviews searching for someone else's reviews. No one will stumble over other people's reviews to find mine. What you see is what you get. If you don't want to see it, don't want to get it, just tell me to stop sending it to you. You can be as impolite as you want. I don't mind.

I want to make OBIR as widely available as possible (since my promoting the genre would hardly work if nobody got to see it), but I can understand why some people DON'T want to see it. Time is precious for professionals after all, and if they regard OBIR as a waste of time than certainly it is my duty to stop sending it to them. I'm trying to help people, not hinder them.

And then there is always the possibility my reviews will be considered pointless, or erroneous, or irrelevant, or just plain garbage. All I can say is they're the best I can do. This is how I react to what I read. These are the impressions I come away with. One reader's opinion. Nothing more. Nothing less.

And of course OBIR is just a fanzine, a personal "amateur press" manifestation. It's not as if thousands of readers will be waiting with bated breath to find out what I'm going to review next. I doubt very much even a single professional will consider my reviews of any importance. Though I want my readership to be as wide as possible, it is probable the vast majority of readers fond of the genre will never even hear of it, let alone read it. I'll be lucky if 200 people read it on a regular basis, so it is not as if OBIR has any significance to the industry. No one's professional career is going to be riding on what I write in these pages. And thank god for that. I couldn't handle the responsibility.

I do have an ego, but it doesn't extend to hurting other people. I want to celebrate the genre, not kill it.



Issue #2 of OBIR will come out whenever it is ready to come out. It will feature reviews of the contents of **Lackington's Magazine**, a publication I only recently became aware of. There will be other reviews as well, though of what I do not yet know.

One idea I'm toying with, once the finalists list for this year's Auroras are announced, is reviewing some of the stories and books that didn't make the finalists list. And then, when the winners are announced, reviewing both them and the runners up. This will be spread out over many future issues I should think.

I will be purchasing books and magazines from time to time, though as mentioned in my editorial, I have limited income and therefore limited means of acquiring review copies. So I really would appreciate Canadian publishers and authors sending me PDFs of current or upcoming publications. It would be wonderful to have a wide selection to choose from. I don't actually expect to be inundated with review PDFs, I might not receive any, but should a "flood" of works pour in I will endeavour to review as many as humanly possible.

It is my hope people will find my reviews interesting, or entertaining, perhaps amusing, or at the very least, worth browsing through in search of some story, magazine, anthology or novel that sounds worth reading. If my modest effort results in even a slight increase in the readership for any given author, I figure I will have accomplished something I can be proud of.

Then again, the Creative Ink Festival may hit the national news with film footage of me being tarred and feathered and run out of town precariously balanced on a greasy rail. My amateur attempt to promote the industry may not have quite the impact I was hoping for.

But I am a fanzine editor. We live for fresh disasters. They make for lengthy human interest articles in our personal fanzines. Who knows what OBIR reaction I will write about in my next **Space Cadet**...

I am certainly very interested to find out what you think of OBIR. Please drop me a line at:

< [The Graeme](mailto:the_graeme@obir.ca) >