

PARSEC Meeting Schedule

April 2005

Date: April 9th 2005 - 2 PM
Topic: Dr. Eric Davin presents "WEIRD SISTERS:
Women and Weird Tales Magazine, 1923-1954."
Location: Allegheny Branch of Carnegie Library

May 2005

Date: May 14th 2005 - 2 PM
Topic: TBA
Location: TBA

June 2005

Date: June 11th 2005 - 2 PM
Topic: TBA
Location: TBA

The Carnegie Library. Allegheny Regional is approximately 1 mile north of Downtown Pittsburgh. Situated in Allegheny Center in the Central North Side neighborhood, Allegheny Regional lies just behind Allegheny Center immediately beside the old Buhl Planetarium. For Directions please refer to the Parsec web site: <http://www.parsec-sff.org/meet.html>

PARSEC

The Pittsburgh Area's Premiere Science-Fiction Organization
P.O. Box 3681, Pittsburgh, PA 15230-3681

President - Kevin Geiselman	Vice President - Sarah Wade-Smith
Treasurer - Greg Armstrong	Secretary - Joan Fisher
Commentator - Ann Cecil	

Website: <http://www.parsec-sff.org>

Meetings - Second Saturday of every month.

Dues: \$10 full member, \$2 Supporting member

Sigma is edited by David Brody
Send article submissions to: sigma@spellcaster.org



SIGMA

The Newsletter of PARSEC • April 2005 • Issue 229

Geis on *R.O.D.* Ferrier on Books

Davin on Popularity





View From the Top

The President's Column - Kevin Geiselman

Last week I received a call from CMU concerning a help desk job. Hoody-hoo! An opportunity to leave the underpaid, dead-end job I happen to be in right now.

But with that turn of good luck, things began to go quite wrong. It started innocuously enough with the button on my pants popping off. Some vandal greased the door handles of my car while I was at work. I went

to get an oil change and was told that my radiator coolant wasn't working properly so I would need the radiator flushed. The mechanics then proceeded to pump cold fluid into the hot radiator, cracking the top wide open.

Then, I was supposed to get an e-mail from CMU setting up the specifics for my interview but that e-mail never came and my e-mail to them reminding them about it has gone unanswered.

Finally, and this is relevant to the rest of you, I contacted the Allegheny Branch of the Carnegie Library to make sure we had the meeting space reserved for next month. I thought I had scheduled for May but wasn't sure. I learned that their policies had changed and I would have to sign a contract or else I would lose the space I had previously scheduled for April. On top of that, they have instituted a \$30 cleanup fee for having food. This was retroactively assessed to cover last month's meeting.

I will be contacting them to see if the fee can be waived if we haul our trash away and run the sweeper. If that cannot be agreed to we will either not be having food at our meetings or we will have to find another meeting space.

And speaking of meetings, we don't have any program scheduled for next month's meeting or any subsequent meeting. It's vitally important that we get some ideas and take action, otherwise we'll just be sitting around, hungry and bored.

Call for Artists!

Time is running out to submit art for the Parsec Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror Art Calendar. The deadline is April 30. Do it now and save yourself the trouble of doing it later and having to travel back in time to submit it. (You will know who you are!) More details at: <http://www.parsec-sff.org/calendar.html>

Filk News

Randy Hoffman will be performing in the Acoustic Songwriters Showcase at the Starlite Lounge in Blawnox on the evening of Saturday, May 7.

Confluence regular Pete Grubbs will be one of the acts performing in the Songwriters Show at Moondogs in Blawnox along with Tony Lee and one of this year's Confluence guests, Jack Erdie, on the evening of Wednesday, April 20.

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- #1083 - *The Faerie Queen*, by Edmund Spenser.
- #1090 - *The Tales of Hoffmann*, by Jacques Offenbach.
- #1097 - *Metamorphosis*, by Franz Kafka.
- #1103 - *Cat's Cradle*, by Kurt Vonnegut.
- #1106 - *Puss in Boots*, by Charles Perrault.
- #1112 - *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, by Douglas Adams.
- #1162 - *Contact*, by Carl Sagan.
- #1165 - *Pet Sematary*, by Stephen King.
- #1166 - *The Andromeda Strain*, by Michael Crichton.
- #1175 - *The Voyages of Dr. Doolittle*, by Hugh Lofting.

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- Fantasy characters: Always daydream or sometimes nightmare? Why do they work so hard not to surprise their readers?
- Tissue engineering and regenerative medicine.
- Dominating Children's Literature. Should children's literature be guided?
- The SciFi channel: New purveyor of B movies?
- When good monsters go bad. Dracula? Angel?
- Eternal series. Corporate vs open source.
- Extended sim-city.
- Can you describe Alien Senses?
- Why are horror movies so bad?
- Battlestar Galactica: A sign that TV is getting it?
- Sex in Heavy G's: Would the human race continue?
- Paranormal Studies.
- Where are the SF stories about botanists?
- How do you target to young adults?

The meeting broke up at 4:30pm.



Confluence Report: The Parallax Second Players

Kimberly Eklund

Coinciding with the 40th anniversary of publication of Frank Herbert's *Dune*, the Parallax Second Players will be reviving their hit musical, *Dune, the Soft-Rock Musical*. Look forward to Arrakis good time as the players transport you to the sandy world of interplanetary intrigue and comedy! See the evil Baron get his just desert! See sandworms and Fremen run amok! And be prepared to be blown away by the acoustic marvel of SurroundSand®! The script has been trimmed down, punched up, buffed out and it's got grit!

Anyone interested in working on the production--cast, crew or production staff--should contact Kimberly Eklund at kimbeauxe@earthlink.net. Formal cast and crew calls will be coming soon.

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imaginary friend Charlie, who she makes up after the traumatic death of her mother. Over the course of the movie Charlie becomes more and more violent although the father (who is a psychiatrist) is convinced it is the daughter acting out. Though the movie does have moments which could be considered genuinely scary, the ending is the kind where you should have seen it coming, and are frustrated that you didn't. It is highly cliched and very disappointing.

Now last and least, *Boogeyman*, which I went into with a bad feeling which was proven correct. It is the standard traumatic childhood event that haunts Watson's character to adulthood, while everyone around tells him he needs to let it go. Besides the fact that it was only moderately scary there are a few scenes that make no sense and do not seem to have any real connection to the plot. The ending is easily spotted less than halfway into the movie, and this is all without mentioning the acting, which does nothing to help.

It really is a shame that a collection of movies, two of which did have promise, turned out to be such duds. I have no idea about their commercial success. I have a feeling they did very well thanks to easily entertained teenagers (the same collection that thought the *American Pie* movies were comic genius). I can only hope that the rest of the years horror movies are better, though with *Cursed* on the horizon I have a sinking feeling it is only going to get worse.



Reviews

Books

Sister Alice

by Robert Reed

reviewed by Chris Ferrier

The plot of *Sister Alice* spans millions of years. Originally published as five individual stories from 1993 to 2000, the different sections were rewritten for the novel and each in turn moves the plot forward across millennia.

In the far future of the galaxy, one thousand individuals are tested, selected and genetically enhanced. They became the founders of the Great Families. Through their work, the galaxy-wide Great Wars that threatened all of human existence are finally ended. Their leadership brings about the Ten-Million-Year Peace. In return, their success brings them wealth and power far beyond the reach of average citizens.

Then Alice, a member of the Chamberlin Family, joins a group of scientists at the galactic core. According to quantum theory, new universes bubble up out of the existing one, are briefly connected to it by an umbilical cord, and then break away. The scientists manage to capture a baby universe and attempt to open the umbilical cord wide enough for a soul to pass through while at the same time preventing any of the new universe from entering the old one. They fail. When the two meet, disaster follows. The vast energies released destroy large numbers of worlds and their populations.

Only Alice Chamberlin returns to Earth from the Core. Only she accepts blame for the accident. She is imprisoned for her part in the disaster. As a result of her actions, the Chamberlin Family loses its status among the Great Families and it is reviled by the average citizen.

Before her imprisonment, Alice visits her clone brother, Ord, the baby of the family line. She manages to give him important information. He is either too young to understand it or it is blocked from his mind until it is needed.

While Alice's actions set the events in the novel in motion, the plot was about Ord's attempts to restore the family honor. First, a much older Ord must escape from the Chamberlin Family compound on Earth. Then, his quest takes him across vast quantities of time and space. He is both helped and hindered by two long time friends/enemies. Ravleen is a member of the warrior Sanchex Family and Xo is a member of the calculating Nuyen Family. Both of them are manipulated by carefully orchestrated mind control used by their respective families. Ravleen hates Ord. She relentlessly pursues him and tries to destroy him. Xo tries to discover Ord's plans so he can betray him.

Ord's ultimate destination is the galactic core where the baby universe is contained and a final meeting with Sister Alice.

The use of the individual stories allow the plot to move forward and backward across time and space following the action. Because of their great life spans, the members of the Great Families continue as characters from one section to the next. They are Olympian in their powers and passions. The plot has action and intrigue in abundance.

Recommended.

Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell

by Susanna Clarke

reviewed by Chris Ferrier

The lack of a period after Mr in the title is not a mistake. The setting of *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell* is England during the years 1806 to 1817. The book is faithful to the period not only in its depiction of society and manners, but also in spelling and punctuation. The plot unfolds in a leisurely, perhaps slow to some readers, fashion. The author intrudes to provide descriptions or point out facts otherwise unavailable to the reader in the main text. Then there are the numerous footnotes. They range from more authorial comments, to recitations of anecdotes and songs, to excerpts from books about historical characters or the characters in the novel, to excerpts from books written by the characters in the novel. The footnotes may contain useful information or may simply be entertaining.

The novel evokes the world of William Thackeray, Jane Austin, and Charles Dickens, although they would find the casual acceptance of magic among the general population disconcerting. They also wouldn't recognize the alternate history of England. In the year 1110, an army of Daoine Sidhe or Fairy Folk attacked the north of England. King Henry set out to meet them with his troops and was soundly defeated. After his defeat, the king surrendered the northern part of England to their leader, a young man later known as John Uskglass. John Uskglass, also called the Raven King, ruled his kingdom for three hundred years. His rule was the foundation of magic in England and the beginning of the Golden Age of magic. In time, magic declined into the Silver Age. Finally, it ceased.

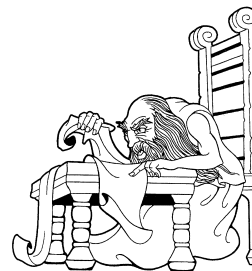
The book begins with a meeting of the York society of magicians. The members are theoretical magicians. Not one of them has ever cast a spell for no magic has been performed in England for 200 years. This is about to change. The theoretical magicians of York are about to meet Mr Norrell who, by his own account, is "quite a tolerable practical magician". His ambition is to bring practical magic back to England.

Mr Norrell believes he is the only practical magician in England. But Jonathan Strange, setting out through the countryside to court a young lady, meets a strange vagabond who tells him he, Jonathan Strange, is a magician. So he decides to try a spell and impress the lady. He succeeds. In time, Jonathan Strange becomes Mr Norrell's student, then his rival.

Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell is the story of two magicians and how their magic changes both England and their own lives. Events in the first part of the book start an inevitable movement toward the events in the later chapters. The

March Minutes

Joan Fisher



March 12th. The meeting start early with Greg taking pre-meeting suggestions for topics to help spark peoples thoughts for the meeting. Kevin started the meeting at 2:10 PM with various announcements.

The parsce picnic is hopefully the 3rd week in August, to be held at a grove in South Park.

Greg gave the treasurer's report.

Ann proved she knew just about everyone by introducing nearly every member in the room.

Kevin Geiselman announced various movies that were hitting the big screens.

Diane Turnshek brought up questions about how the PARSEC Announce list was being run. A person needed to get approval to be on the list if they were not a PARSEC member. She felt it should be open to anyone, as long as they were not just there to spam the list. There was an in depth discussion on the matter with the pros and cons being discussed by one and all. It came down to a vote. The outcome was - Drumroll please....that it would be open to everyone. But anyone spamming would be taken off the list.

The winner of the raffle was Ken Chiacchia, who took the "Thief in the Night" work of art

At 3 PM the main part of the meeting started.

The following is a list of possible program topics the group came up with, including Greg's pre-meeting list:

- How will knowing what Titan looks like Change SF? How much do you have to pay attention?
- Is Tech Catching up with SF? Is SF always going to be ahead?
- Antique Heros. SF protagonist are getting older. 60 year olds in spandex?
- The continuing story of how the internet has changed the publishing industry and writing style.
- Have movies like *Lord of the Rings* changed our expectations in the movie theatre?
- What would Leonardo do? Can one man still have a significant effect on science or society?
- Modern day heretics. Who in the modern scientific community has been forced to recant? Campbell?
- Fantasy landscapes. Why Familiar or Fantastic? Just to reassure readers?
- Borrowing flavors of other genres is ok as long as —? The fling thunk factor.

America's Most Popular SF & F

Eric Davin

In November, 2004, the Library of Congress released a list of the "Top 1,000 Books" to be found in public library collections throughout the nation. (You can find this list at www.oclc.org/research/top1000.) The listed books were the ones to be found in the most collections and therefore the books most widely available. This may not be a perfect method to determine the "most popular" books, but perhaps it's just as good (or better) as The New York Times bestseller list. That tells us what people are currently buying. The Library of Congress list presumably tells us what patrons are requesting their libraries to stock.

Religious texts were popular. So was fiction, accounting for almost half of the list. And among the fiction titles were some well-known science fiction and fantasy works. H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine* was the first SF title on the list at #225 -- making a British socialist who died in 1946 America's most popular SF writer (at least by this criterion). Next came Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* at #250, followed by J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* at #256. Franz Kafka's Kafkaesque *The Trial* was #299.

Then we're back to Wells, with *The War of the Worlds* at #309. Children's books by Roald Dahl and Maurice Sendak (both known to write fantasies) were at numbers 423 and 424, while *Dianetics*, by L. Ron Hubbard, was #562. Hubbard's book isn't actually SF -- or is it? -- but at least it's by a once-popular pulp SF writer). In the same category of scientific religiosity -- or religious science fiction -- we find Tim Lahaye's apocalyptic *Left Behind* at #620. Brit author Anthony Burgess came next, with *A Clockwork Orange* at #786. Next up was reactionary right-wing science fiction in the form of Ayn Rand's 1957 dystopia, *Atlas Shrugged* at #819. But then we're back to Wells again, with *The Invisible Man* at #820.

And that's it for F & SF among the top 1,000 books in American libraries! Only nine titles, out of almost 500 novels on the list -- a dozen if we stretch to include Dahl, Sendak, and Hubbard. Puts things in rather humbling perspective, I think.

Of course, one has to draw the line somewhere and "1,000" is a nice round number which catches the imagination. But, if we were to look at the next 184 titles which almost made the list, fantasy and science fiction becomes a little better represented. Here are 15 more titles which just missed the list. Make of them what you will:

- #1018 - *The Snow Queen*, by Hans Christian Andersen.
- #1033 - *The Borrowers*, by Mary Norton.
- #1035 - *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, by J. K. Rowling.
- #1048 - *The Dark is Rising*, by Susan Cooper.
- #1052 - *Alice in Wonderland*, by Lewis Carroll.

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numerous characters are all fully developed by the author. The prose is quite readable in spite of the period spelling and the footnotes. The author's use of humor and irony are reminiscent of Thackeray. Clarke has written a successful first novel

Recommended.

Anime

R.O.D. Read or Die

reviewed by Kevin Geiselman

We are introduced to Yomiko Readman through her apartment, which is filled with books. On bookshelves, on the nightstand, on the windowsills, piles all around the bed and even on the bed. When the phone rings, Yomiko reaches out from under newspapers and books to push a pile of books off the phone to answer it. She was sleeping in her clothes. As she collects her coat and things to go out she gingerly steps around piles of books. The stairs of her apartment building are lined with books. She walks down four flights of stairs because the elevator is packed with books. And where is Yomiko going? She's going to the bookstores.

In some ways, Yomiko leads the kind of life many of us could lead if left to our own devices. I know that the books I buy tend to collect on any convenient horizontal surface and it is a challenge to control the buildup. I have a pile of books I haven't read yet and am currently reading three different books depending on what room I happen to be in. I'm expecting a package of books in the mail



this week. One Internet reviewer thought the name *Read or Die* was dumb but for those of us who live and breathe books, we understand Yomiko instantly.

But, as this is anime, the story quickly diverges from the reality we know. While she reads a newly purchased book on a street corner, Yomiko is oblivious to the chaos around her until she is almost struck by a second crashing vehicle. (She was too busy reading page one to notice the truck sliding by on its side.). Then comes the swarm of hornets and the creepy guy riding a giant grasshopper, intent on stealing the book she just bought as part of a plot to take over the world. Yomiko Readman, in addition to being a substitute teacher and bibliomaniac is also a secret agent for the British Library with the magical ability to manipulate paper.

This three episode OVA (Original Video Animation, a straight-to-video release) is from the same people that produced *Slayers* and *Excel Saga* and you can see it in the animation style. Even though Yomiko's partner, Miss Deep, has a little too much fanservice in her character design (one is reminded of Naga in *Slayers*), she is not as shallow a character as her leather-clad jiggle implies. And

while the "stop the mad scientist from destroying the world" plot isn't new, the details of getting there are what make this worth the price of admission.

I've seen three versions of this show. I usually prefer Japanese with English Subtitles but most of the action takes place outside of Japan and hearing the American President and staff of the British Library speaking Japanese is a little disconcerting. Cartoon Network has been showing the English Dubbed version late at night and it is probably a better way of viewing this, referring to Yomiko as "Agent Paper" instead of saying "The Paper" in an over-enunciated English inside the Japanese dialogue. But the fansubs let you in on little secrets the major market releases miss. For example, in addition to the books, Yomiko's apartment has post-it notes all over the place. The fansub otaku translate these notes so you know they are reminding her to turn out the light, eat (she leaves the box lunch behind), save money (she spends that on books) and lock the door behind her when she leaves (she doesn't). It also translates a "wanted poster" of Yomiko in the bookstore district to let you know that this is reminding the store staff to be extra polite because she is their best customer. (Ever wonder if your name is on such a list at your local bookstore?)

My favorite parts are the paper airplane dogfighting over New York and Yomiko stopping bullets with an index card. Keep an eye out on Cartoon Network's Adult Swim program or see it if it becomes available for rental.

TV

Doctor Who: Rose

reviewed by Kevin Geiselman

By the time you read this, the first episode of the new Dr. Who series will have aired on British television. *Dr. Who* had been one of the longest running series on television, beginning in 1963 with William Hartnell and then reborn numerous times before finally ending in 1989. OK, there was a one-off TV movie in 1996 but I didn't like it so I don't really count it.

"Rose", opens with a portrayal of present day London that seems to show time flowing at two different rates. Rose Taylor (Billie Piper) works in a department store and the world outside her life seems to be accelerating on without her. That is, until she is attacked by animated mannequins and saved by The Doctor (Christopher Eccleston) who blows up her place of work.

Yeah, The Doctor blows up the whole building. And yet, this latest, grittier



incarnation has the humor, wit and distracted amusement that makes Eccleston's Doctor that same core personality as the eight Doctors that have gone before him. I grew up on the Fourth Doctor, portrayed by Tom Baker so he was the foundation that I compared all the other Doctors to. I've seen episodes with all the other Doctors and Christopher Eccleston ranks right up at the top of my list. He's quirky and playful without having to wear 8 foot scarves or celery on his lapel. When he's serious, you get the sense that he really does know about all the secrets of space and time. His accent seems a bit "thick" at times but even that is covered in the episode. Rose asks, "If you're an alien, why do you sound like you're from the north."

"Lots of planets have a north."

I recall the original episodes being half an hour long but with story arcs that would carry over four episodes. The first episode of this new series is an hour and a half, which is a good length to get the ball rolling. The next 12 will be a fast paced 1 hour. It's too bad our only way to get these will be through online downloads provided by Internet pirates.



Movies

White Noise, Hide and Seek and Boogeyman

reviewed by Sasha Riley

A friend and I were discussing at the end of 2004 that it looked like 2005 was going to be the year of the horror movie. Little did we know that it was going to be the year of the badly written, cliched, predictable horror movie.

Or at least it seems that way from the three examples I have seen so far: *White Noise* Staring Michael Keaton, *Hide and Seek* starring Robert De Niro and Dakota Fanning, and *Boogeyman* starring Barry Watson and Emily Deschanel.

White Noise had a very interesting idea, and could have been a good movie though sadly the commercials did not give an accurate picture of what the movie was going to be. The basic idea is that Keaton's character, Jonathan Rivers attempts to contact his dead wife through "white noise". He quickly becomes obsessed with hearing more from his wife and helping people through clues she gives him. At the halfway point he was still just a flat character with no personality and an obsession and he stayed that way until the very anti climatic end. Though it starts off interesting, *White Noise* quickly took a turn for the worst and never recovered.

Hide and Seek was more interesting, even though De Niro was far to old to play Fanning's father. The concept behind this movie was a young girl and her

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