

Parsec February 2004 Meeting

Date & Time: 14 February 2004
Topic: Writer Michael Arnzen*
Location: East Liberty Branch of Carnegie Library
(Directions are on page 11)

*Michael Arnzen is the author of the Bram Stoker award-winning first novel, *Grave Markings*, and several short story and poetry collections. He is currently an Associate Professor of English at Seton Hill College. Check out his web site at www.gorelets.com and find out what gorelets are!

Tentative Meeting Schedule

March 2004

Date: 13 March 2004
Topic: Confluence Panel Discussion conducted by Ann Cecil
Location: East Liberty Branch of Carnegie Library

April 2004

Date: 10 April 2004
Topic: TBA
Location: East Liberty Branch of Carnegie Library

Inside illustrations are from Laurence Housman's 1893 illustrations for Christina Rossetti's poem *Goblin Market*.

The cover is from a fifteenth century woodcutting depicting shape shifting witches.

PARSEC

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

President - Kevin Geiselman Vice President - Kevin Hayes
Treasurer - Greg Armstrong Secretary - Bill Covert
Commentator - Ann Cecil
Website: trfn.clpgh.org/parsec

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

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The View From the Summit

The President's Column - Kevin Geiselman

In 1947, President Truman sent then Colonel Byrd along with a major military task force to Antarctica to find the secret Nazi "Base 211" concealed somewhere in the Muhlig-Hoffman Mountains. The USS Thresher was destroyed on April 10th, 1963 by a Soviet scalar electro-magnetic howitzer. Americans did not go to the Moon in 1969. It was all staged for television. John Edwards (no, not the Presidential candidate) can speak with relatives who have "crossed over." Nearly four million Americans have been abducted by aliens.

Now, you might sit back and say "Pshaw! People who believe that crap are just fools." but the shocking fact is that a huge number of people believe weird things in one form or another. For every person that believes that Americans never went to the Moon, there is another who not only believes that we went there but that we discovered undeniable signs of habitation by an advanced civilization and have been desperately trying to cover that fact up for the past three decades. And for every enlightened, scientific argument that a reasonable and sane person puts forth there is irrefutable proof that crop circles are created by extraterrestrial intelligences.

Do you remember in 1977 when the famous Face on Mars image was taken by the Viking orbiter? The claim was that the perfect symmetry of the Face's human features were proof of intelligent design. In 2001, Martian Odyssey took a high-resolution image that showed the Face to be a hill. An interestingly shaped hill but just a hill. But, if you take the image, split it down the middle and mirror each side, the one side looks like a human face and the other looks like a lion's. A sphinx! Clearly its asymmetry proves its intelligent design. Go to enterprisemission.com and you will see that the Spirit landing site in Gusev Crater is littered with metal boxes, machine parts and other artifacts. The entire planet is literally covered with cities, roads, towns and now garbage of a past civilization on a scale even Percival Lowell didn't imagine.

Sigh Maybe I lack imagination but they look like rocks to me. Interesting rocks, but rocks nonetheless.

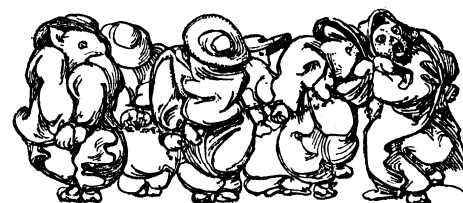
When a pair of guys in England came out and said "Yea, we made those crop circles and this is how we did it" there were those who stood up and said, "No, you couldn't have." Ray Wallace faked the famous Patterson Bigfoot film and, after his death his nephew even produced the prop feet that had been used to stomp all over the Northwest, yet the cryptozoologists insist that he couldn't have fooled them.

So, why do people believe weird things? Haven't we yet evolved beyond superstition and pseudo-science? Apparently not. There must be something about

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Announcements

- Don't forget that the deadline for *Triangulations 2004* is March 31st. Submission guidelines can be found on page 8 of this issue or at the PARSEC website: <http://trfn.clpgh.org/parsec/works.html>. Editor Barbara Carlson tells Sigma that she has some strong submissions and "expects an excellent collection". If you have any questions you can email her at bcarlson@andrew.cmu.edu.
- All you readers and writers. Tell your underage acquaintances to sharpen their word processors and get their stories in. The deadline for the Alpha Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror Workshop for Young Writers is looming ever closer -- March 31, 2004 for this summer's workshop at University of Pittsburgh/Greensburg. All info available at: <http://alpha.spellcaster.org/>. Loads of fun, lots of work and believe it or not, learning about the craft of writing.
- At approximately 4 PM on Tues. February 3, Sigma editor David Brody become the father of Samuel Patrick Brody, his second child. Mother, son and big sister are all doing well.



Directions to the New Parsec Meeting Site

The East Liberty Branch of the Carnegie Library is at 130 S. Whitfield Street in East Liberty. (N40 27.622 W79 55.573) By public transportation, take the 77A, 77B, 86A or 86B to the stop at Penn and Whitfield and walk a block south. Take a 71B or 71C to Centre and Highland and walk north and then left onto Baum Blvd. From the East Busway Station at East Liberty, walk west on Penn Circle for two blocks, turn right onto Highland for 1/2 block then left onto Baum.

From Downtown you can take Penn Avenue to East Liberty. Turn right onto S. Beatty and find a place to park. Or take Baum Blvd. from town until you can turn left onto S. Beatty to park. From Oakland, take 5th Avenue to Highland. Cross Penn and then turn left onto Baum. Past the fountain and park behind the library. From the North, get on Route 28 and cross the 40th Street Bridge then up the hill to turn left onto Penn Avenue. From East and the Parkway East, get off at Wilkinsburg onto Ardmore. This turns into Penn which you can follow through East Liberty and then left onto S. Beatty.

Capsule Book Reviews

by Diane Turnshek

Charmed Destinies

by

Mercedes Lackey, Rachel Lee and Catherine Asaro

(\$6.50 US, 2003 from Silhouette Books, ISBN 0-37321833-8). These three novellas, from a trio of authors known for their romantic science fiction and fantasy, are teasers to novels just released from Silhouette's new Luna Line. Mercedes Lackey's tale has graphic scenes of sustained marital rape--ugh. Rachel Lee's barely-SF story feels like practice at band camp. Catherine Asaro's third is a not-to-be-missed joy. 1/3 HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

A Kiss of Shadows

by

Laurell K. Hamilton

(\$6.99, 2000 from Ballantine Books, ISBN 0-345-42340-2). Meredith Gentry, private investigator, is a royal Faerie princess. I didn't know men came in so many colors and flavors; Meredith enjoys them all. I'm breathless for the sequel, which is just out. RECOMMENDED (not for young readers)

Hitting the Skids in Pixeltown: the Phobos Science Fiction Anthology

edited by

Orson Scott Card, Keith Olexa, and Christian O'Toole

(2003 from Phobos Books, ISBN 0-9720026-1-8). Stories by Paul Pence, Rebecca Carmi and ten others are wonderful. No theme in this series of anthologies, which is one of the best anthology markets in the world today. Read it, be inspired, and then send in your best work. HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

Bagombo Snuff Box: Uncollected Short Fiction

by

Kurt Vonnegut

(\$13.95 PB, 1999 from Putnam Pub Group, ASIN: 0399145052) Precious, if dated, stories show what a master he is. Many of these previously uncollected stories are mundane fiction. I'd recommend *Welcome to the Monkey House* for his later, more genre-oriented work. Here's a selection from the introduction:

1. Use the time of a total stranger in such a way that he or she will not feel the time was wasted.
2. Give the reader at least one character he or she can root for.
3. Every character should want something, even if it is only a glass of water.
5. Every sentence must do one of two things--reveal character or advance the action.

Notes from the Maintenance Department

The Editor's Column - David Brody

(Note: The opinions expressed here are those of the editor alone, not of *Sigma* or *Parsec*. They are, of course, the correct opinions, but you have every right to disagree. It's a free country. Sort of.)

As the father of a toddler just discovering the limits of her own independence, it was inevitable that I would see the two Mars rovers as humanity's little children, on their own, but still needing guidance and nurturing from their earthbound parents. As a reader of science fiction, I wonder what we will give birth to next and where it will all really take us.

For those that allocate the money and create the goals for America's space exploration program, the motivation has always been political - something used to pulled the electorate together behind a false cause. That cause, on at least two occasions, has been the re-election of a member of the Bush family. In the case of manned exploration of the Moon, it was the perceived need to one-up the Soviets. The sad truth is that "a sense of wonder" has never been a relevant motivator for governments to reach for the stars.

The vague plan for future space travel that the "Deserter in Chief" recently tried to foist on the America people, has more to do with John Kerry or John Edwards than with Percival Lowell. The money we could be using for space is wrapped up in pork-barrel spending and war-mongering. Unless we can put politics and power aside, I don't believe that there will be a manned mission to Mars or even the Moon in my lifetime. My toddler might live to see it but when she's old enough to understand me, I'll advise her not to hold her breath.

So, what's to be done?

I honestly haven't got a clue. This is a problem of inspiration and imagination competing with greed and short-sightedness and it seems to me to be highly intractable. So keep writing and thinking and dreaming. One day, when we're all fed and clothed and housed, when all our weapons have been beaten into plowshares, when we elect leaders instead of bureaucrats, then we'll go to Mars and beyond. In the meantime enjoy the amazing pictures and when the nights are clear, gaze up at the sky.

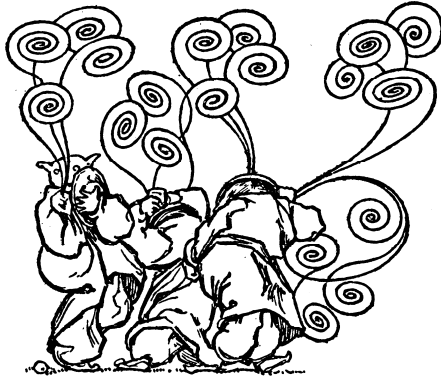
On another topic, I hope you've all had a chance to digest some of the changes I've made to *Sigma*. As far as the layout and design, it's pretty much where I think it should be. As far as content, I've got a lot more to do. In this regard, I would like to reiterate my plea for cover artwork. I am committed to make *Sigma* appealing to the eye as well as the mind.

What I need now most is your feedback. Let me know how you feel about *Sigma*'s direction. I'm reachable at sigma@spellcaster.org or dbrody@mindspring.com.

Geiselman - Continued from Page 2

these myths, falsehoods, misinterpretations and outright lies that keep us coming back. Hopefully there will come a time that we will put away our primitive, fearful childish beliefs. Knock on wood.

Geis



Tjernlund - Continued from Page 7

for completion's sake. The Kuiper Belt, a newly discovered super-sized version of the inner Asteroid Belt, starts at Neptune and extends out to about 185 miles on our personal scale. We will include, and finish with, the Oort Cloud of comets and other objects that just barely manage to stay in orbit around our sun. These extend about a light year out from our Sun. On our scale they would be 234,000 miles out, which ironically brings us back to where we started, the real distance from the Earth to the Moon. This last distance to the Oort Cloud is somewhat fuzzy, as the actual limits of our solar system are still being determined.



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Books

The Devil in the Dust: The First Book of Outremer

by

Chaz Brenchley

Reviewed by Larry Ivkovich

While trying to fill the heroic fantasy void until George R.R. Martin's next installment of *Songs of Ice and Fire* is finally available, I picked up the first volume of Chaz Brenchley's *Outremer Cycle* on a whim.

This British series, all six books of which are out in paperback, is set in the magical world of Outremer, where composites of French, Middle Eastern and medieval British cultures co-exist. *The Devil in the Dust* is a well-written and intriguing first volume. Slow moving, it nevertheless contains some well-defined characters and enough interesting situations to keep you turning the pages (the whole series was published in Britain as a trilogy but has been split into six volumes here).

Outremer has long been the "super-power" of its world with its enemies, the Sharai, forever trying to conquer them. The Sharai's country is hidden by magic and is known only as "The Folded Land."

Marron, a novice of the Knights Ransomer (the religious army of Outremer) is in training at the country's main stronghold, Roq de Rancon. Forced to participate in a bloody massacre with his fellow warrior-priests, his faith and resolve to follow in his father's footsteps as a knight are badly shaken. His expert fighting skills catch the interest of one of the senior knights, Sieur Anton d'Escrivey. Marron becomes d'Escrivey's squire and gradually learns alternate ways to serve "the God."

Julianne de Rance, the daughter of the King's Shadow, is sent to be married off to a rival nobleman in a political arrangement. On her journey to meet her husband-to-be for the first time, her caravan is stopped by a jinni in the form of a giant dust devil that prophecys greatness for her. Puzzled by this fantastic event, she and her mysterious comrade, Elisande, stop at Roq de Rancon where their lives get entangled with Marron's and d'Escrivey's. An attack on the fortress by Sharai warriors forces them all to reevaluate and question the choices they have made.

If you like slow tension and intrigue and well-developed world-building, this is recommended. Brenchley's prose is crisp and descriptive and his characterizations are nicely done. The last quarter of the book finally cuts loose and the ending left me wanting to see what will happen next in the second volume, *The Tower of the King's Daughter*.



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Media

Firefly: The Complete Series
(DVD Boxed Set)
Reviewed by Rhiannon Weaver

Five hundred years in the future, the two remaining superpowers of China and the United States have merged into the oppressive governing Alliance. To escape the tyranny, those who fought against the Alliance in the recent war have nowhere to go but to the very edge of Alliance control -- a fringe of terraformed colony worlds where ill-equipped settlers eke out a frontier existence. This history provides an odd amalgamation of old and new, as well as East and West, to Joss Whedon's television series *Firefly*. Six-shooters are as common as spaceships, Han Solo-esque smugglers transport ill-gotten medical supplies or black market cattle, and even the lowliest uneducated thief knows how to speak Chinese. Over this backdrop, *Firefly* follows the adventures of Captain Mal Reynolds (Nathan Fillion) and his misfit crew aboard the Firefly-class spaceship Serenity.

Mal is an embittered ex-rebel, an honorable man who nonetheless does what is necessary to keep Serenity fueled and flying. He is joined by eight diverse, yet fully realized characters. From staunch, no-nonsense war veteran Zoe, to the idealistic mechanic Kayley, to the dim-witted, double-crossing mercenary Jayne, each character brings a mix of humor, drama and heart to the series. The storylines range from the sprawling two-part introduction "Serenity" to the action-adventure romps "Ariel" and "Trash", to character dramas like "Out of Gas," to more experimental, existential exploration in "Objects in Space." The series meshes standalone episodes with overarching plot and character arcs, such as the mystery behind the fugitives Simon and River Tam, and the ongoing love story between Mal and Inara, a Geisha-trained professional companion. Accenting the harsh, often violent world, the cinematography uses zooms, handheld cameras and natural lighting to give *Firefly* a grittier, more documentary feel than the staid *Star Trek* approach.

There were many reasons for *Firefly*'s early demise on the Fox network, but a lack of quality storytelling was not one of them. Some of the early episodes seem unbalanced, and sometimes the humor seemed a bit forced, but overall *Firefly* is a well-scripted, well-executed series. Re-shuffled episode orders, a darker vision than Whedon's other series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and, and, just perhaps, audience skittishness at the idea of a "Space Western" all led to low ratings and the eventual death of the show. But with the DVD release, sci-fi aficionados have an opportunity to see the series as it was envisioned, and to get behind-the-scenes commentary and information from the creators and actors (Joss Whedon especially gives wonderful DVD commentaries). The last disc left me wishing for more, shaking my head in the usual lamented refrain, "What were they thinking when they cancelled this show?"



Making Astronomical Distances Personal

by Henry Tjernlund

This is one of those "if the Sun were the size of a grapefruit..." comparisons of planetary sizes and distances. However, what if we made it more personal? Let's imagine a typical person as representing the size of Earth. Now this is a little tricky as people are not even close to spherically shaped. Since we think of distances in the context of walking around, we will use the projection or "footprint" of the space a person occupies on the ground. Shoulder to shoulder distance makes a good rule, and for simplicity a radius of 10 inches will be used for the radius of the Earth. So, using the shoulder to shoulder distance to be the approximate size of the Earth, let's see what we come up with for the other objects in our solar system. Distance between the shoulders is approximate to the length of a person's step. In this way, we can get a sense of planetary distances in the context of walking, running, biking, or driving, the type of distances that are most intuitive to us.

So, if Earth were a person standing in a spot (occupying a twenty-inch circle on the ground), then our Moon would be a newborn infant some 50 feet away. The closest planet, Venus, would be another person standing 1 mile away. Mars, the next distant planet but the opposite direction away from the Sun, would be a toddler standing 2 miles away. These distances, of course, are Venus and Mars at their closest approach to Earth. The Sun would be 3.7 miles away and be the size of a 180-foot, 15-story office building.

Let's change our reference and do the typical Sun-outward listing of planets. Again, using the same scale, the Earth is the size of a person, thus the Sun begins as a 15-story office building. Mercury is then an infant about 1.4 miles away. Venus is a person 2.7 miles away. As we stated before, the Earth is a person 3.7 miles away from the Sun. Mars is a toddler 5.6 miles away. Ceres, largest of the minor planets, is a golf ball at 10.2 miles away. Jupiter is a large room area about 20 feet on a side, and is near milepost 19. Saturn is a slightly smaller room area, 16 feet per side, 35 miles out. Uranus is 71 miles distant and a small room 9 feet per side. Neptune would be a similarly sized room, or maybe the size of a van, but some 111 miles distant from our office building of a Sun. Pluto is a trans-Neptunian planet that sometimes crosses just within Neptune's orbit, but at its most distant Pluto could be as far away as 148 miles on our "personal" scale. Pluto would be about the size of a grapefruit, with its moon Charon as a lemon orbiting only 2 and a half feet away. Some astronomers want to reclassify Pluto and Charon as a binary planet rather than a planet and moon system.

An interesting result of this scale is that the speed of light would be about 25 miles per hour, a fast dash pace for an athlete in good shape. By comparison, space flight speeds would be a slow insect's crawl. Let's walk a little farther out

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Michael Kandel to be Confluence GoH

The Guest of Honor for Confluence 2004 will be editor, translator and author Michael Kandel. Kandel is an editor for Harcourt Brace and has acted as translator for the legendary Polish SF writer, Stanislaw Lem. He has written several novels of his own, including *Captain Jack Zodiac*, and *Panda Ray*.

According to Ann Cecil, he's "witty and friendly on top of all that".

In a 1997 *Locus* interview, he said: "I don't believe in that division between commercial fiction and art...There's a payoff from a good book--maybe some wisdom and some fun, both, a good story. In the long run, all the books that last have succeeded commercially as well..."

This will be Kandel's second appearance at Confluence; he was a guest back in February 2000 at the Mars Hotel.

Confluence 2004 runs from July 23rd through July 25th. Visit the Confluence website at <http://trfn.clpgh.org/parsec/conflu/index.html>, for more details.

Triangulation Submission Guidelines

Here are the submission guidelines, for *Triangulation*, the annual collection of short fiction by Parsec members:

1. Must be a PARSEC member (include member number on front page of manuscript).
2. Up to 5,000 words.
3. Science fiction, fantasy or other genre as long as it has an SF or Fantasy aspect.
4. Nothing X-rated ... tasteful sex, violence, etc. okay if it relates to the story.
5. Electronic submission preferred; acceptable formats: .rtf or MS Word 2000.
6. Acceptable fonts: Courier, Times New Roman, Garamond, Arial, Helvetica.
7. Front page should contain your name, address, phone number, email address, number of words in story, PARSEC membership number, title of story and your pen name (if different from your real name). Standard manuscript format is a good place to start (and an excellent place to finish, too). Check out <http://www-2.cs.cmu.edu/~mslee/format.html> for an explanation.
8. Deadline for submission: March 31, 2004.
9. Final acceptance dependent on satisfactory completion of requested revisions; asking for revisions does not guarantee acceptance.
10. We'll be paying a penny a word, like we did for *Triangulation* 2003.
11. You may send submissions to me at bcarlson@andrew.cmu.edu
12. If you can't send it electronically, you can send it to:
Triangulation 2004
c/o Barbara Carlson
145 Margaret Street
Pittsburgh, PA 15210-2236
13. No handwritten manuscripts.

6. Be a sadist. No matter how sweet and innocent your leading characters, make awful things happen to them--in order that the reader may see what they are made of.

7. Write to please just one person. If you open a window and make love to the world, so to speak, your story will get pneumonia.

8. Give your readers as much information as possible as soon as possible. To heck with suspense. Readers should have such complete understanding of what is going on, where and why, that they could finish the story themselves, should cockroaches eat the last few pages. **HIGHLY RECOMMENDED**

