

Parsec March 2004 Meeting

Date: March 13th 2004
Topic: Confluence Panel Discussion conducted by Ann Cecil
Location: East Liberty Branch of Carnegie Library
(Directions on page 11.)

Tentative Meeting Schedule

April 2004

Date: April 10th, 2004
Topic: Self Publishing
Location: East Liberty Branch of Carnegie Library

May 2004

Date: May 8th, 2004
Topic: TBA
Location: East Liberty Branch of Carnegie Library



Cover Illustration - From *The Devil Walk* by Thomas Landseer, London, 1831 as reproduced in *Picture Book of Devils, Demons and Witchcraft* edited by Ernst and Johanna Lehner and published by Dover Publications, Inc.

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

The Newsletter of PARSEC • March 2004 • Issue 216



Rant From the Hilltop

The President's Column - Kevin Geiselman

I remember winters like this. When I was young, there was snow on the ground by Thanksgiving. When Punxatawny Phil saw his shadow, we said, "Of course winter's going to go on for six more weeks, it's February." I walked to and from school in the snow, uphill both ways. No, really. My house and the school were both on separate hills and, well, you get the idea. And when the catastrophists said there was an ice age coming, we could believe it. We didn't worry here in Pittsburgh, the glaciers didn't get this far south during the last big chill.

Except that the ice age didn't come. Not too many years down the way, the winters got warmer. Christmas was brown and wet. We'd get one or two major snowstorms that would drop a foot of snow in a day and then be melted away by the next weekend. We were warned of the dangers of global warming; that the ice caps would melt and flood the heavily populated coasts. We were safe here in Pittsburgh, well above flood stage.

Have you had enough of this winter? I have. Bring on some global warming, I've been cold long enough. Except now the latest theory is that global warming will cause the next ice age. No, really. The fresh water from the melting ice caps will disrupt the warm Gulf Stream, plunging the Eastern part of North America and Europe into another ice age. And, if you believe the filmmakers producing *The Day after Tomorrow* this will all happen in a great, cataclysmic storm. Well, they also produced *Independence Day* wherein an Apple laptop, which normally can't interact with any other Earth-written operating system, succeeds in cracking an alien OS, thus bringing down their entire, non-firewall protected network.

In any case, the sky has been falling in one way or another for so long is it any wonder no one pays attention anymore? Who's to say what the future will hold.

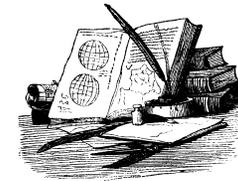
Well, actually, we are. Isn't that's what Science Fiction is about, predicting the future? Or, at least, predicting a possible or even an alternate future? So, don't miss out on your chance for catastrophist prognostication by attending the next meeting where you will have your opportunity to shape the near future by making suggestions on what panel topics should be discussed at Confluence.

Also, a reminder that you should park in the lot **ACROSS THE STREET**. Each quarter gets you 30 minutes on the meter up to 2.5 hours but the 6th quarter takes you up to 7.5 hours. Parking in the lot next to the library doesn't snag you the discount. Now, I have yet to determine if the Authorities are actually patrolling the meters. You can take your chances.

Geis

Announcements

- Diane Turnshek sold her romantic, fantasy short story "Spark of Hope" to storyhouse.com.
- Eric Davin's poem, "Astro Flu," will appear in the all-SF April/May issue of the children's magazine *Boys' Quest*. For any interested, copies can be had for \$4 each from Boys' Quest, Box 227, Bluffton, OH 45812.



Letter - Continued from Page 5

in the next couple years. Attempts to win the prize might even happen as early as this year. If the various traps could be avoided, or minimized, then there should be little reason that this decade would not begin economical access to space.

Henry Tjernlund

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 Wilksburg onto Ardmore. This turns into Penn which you can follow through East Liberty and then left onto S. Beatty.

about the New Weird is that it's not timid.

Flaws aside, it was memorable enough for me to get the prequel, *Chasm City* and I'll probably read *Redemption Ark*, the sequel. I feel that I kind of have to at this point.

Wheelers

by

Ian Stewart and Jack Cohen

reviewed by Ann Cecil

This novel has a lot in it: multiple sets of characters, a multitude of ideas, a variety of plots, and various tones of narrative. Some of the many converge; others never quite seem to click.

For starters, there's Prudence Odingo, super smart but hot-headed, right out of *Indiana Jones/Star Wars*. When we first meet her, she's a lady archaeologist, making discoveries no one else has suspected, but getting cheated out of the fame; later on in the book, she's a hot-shot pilot, taking incredible risks but able to go where no one else can go. She has a nephew, Moses, who is able to understand animals in ways no one else has ever suspected, is kidnapped, taken to China and subjected to weird and brutal experiences that turn him into a 12 year black belt master, able to communicate with aliens in ways that no one else can.

Interspersed with this fairly B-grade narrative is a complex and fascinating depiction of an alien civilization. The biology, terminology, and structure of the aliens, their culture, and their interactions (eventually with Humans) is worked out in intricate and believable detail. They turn out to live next door (galactically speaking), on Jupiter.

And just to make the book a little more complicated, we have a third and fourth collection of characters: a set of Zen Buddhist monks with their own cryptic agenda, and another B movie staple: an independent film crew, complete with fading star, pluckily trying to find a way back into the limelight. While they do contribute plot elements, I pretty much skimmed the film crew sections. The monks in space were interesting, if only moderately pertinent, and had a fully-developed back story that didn't really fit with the main plot.

For a while, it looked like the authors were going for yet another viewpoint, that of a rogue comet that is going to Destroy The Earth if our various characters don't get together with the aliens. Fortunately, the comet sections are few. The reader knows, partially because of the space opera sections, that all will be solved in the end. The suspense is strictly in how the action will play out, particularly how the aliens will react when they discover that the "PoisonBluians" are sentient, upset, and getting closer.

The authors both teach at Warwick University in England, one in math, one in biology. The scenes that really focused on scientific extrapolation were intriguing enough to get me past the scenery-chewing, so I guess this is recommended with reservations.

Notes from the Maintenance Department

The Editor's Column - David Brody

This month, parenthood has worn me out to the point that I have absolutely nothing controversial to say. Normally, I'm a growling little bundle of angry opinions, but a newborn son and a daughter deep into being terribly two have just taken it out of me. I expect to have recovered my feistiness by the next issue, so don't get complacent.

First off, I want to apologize for the problem we've had with type size. The cause has been sorted out, and you should be able to read this issue without the help of an electron microscope.

This month I've included Henry Tjernlund's letter to the editor in response to my rather pessimistic assessment of the future of the American space program in my last column. Henry actually gives me hope that the private sector may revitalize manned space exploration and as usual his contribution is very informative. I hope that we can continue to receive contributions of articles on *real* science, if only to give us all some perspective on the fictional science we spend so much of our lives reading.

You may have noticed that both books reviewed in this issue are written by professional scientists. I'm not sure what this means, but it's interesting that both reviews are positive, but with significant reservations. I remember reading Carl Sagan's *Contact* and being challenged by his ideas, but disappointed by the quality of his prose and the depth of his characterizations. In fact, I can't bring to mind any fiction written by a scientist that told half as good a story as Meville or Tolkien, but if I go any further, I risk offending some the science types in PARSEC, so I'll leave it at that. (Oops, I'm flirting with controversy.)

Just a word about Geis' column: While I won't make a habit of commenting on the opinions expressed by fellow columnists, I couldn't help but notice his remark that Apple laptops "can't interact with any other Earth-written operating system..." As a Macintosh networking professional with a particular expertise in the integration of Macs and PC's, I beg to differ. OS X makes it child's play to share files with Windows. I agree, however with his assessment of the wildly implausible movie *Independence Day*.

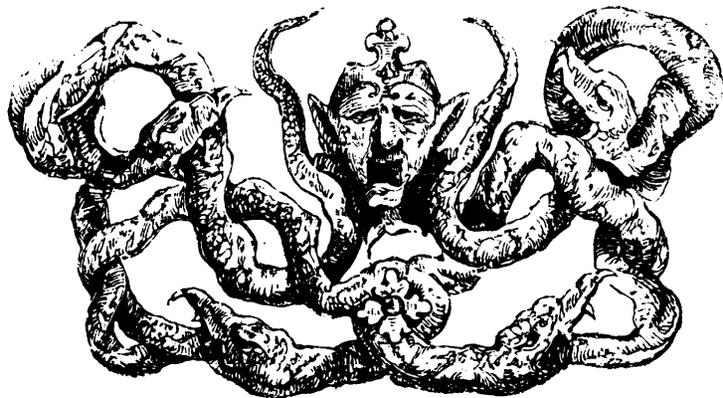
On an unrelated note, I'd like to enlist *Sigma* readers in my search for a play. In a previous existence, I produced and directed plays and I've been itching to do it again, but this time combining it with my interest in SF and fantasy. If any of you know of a short original science fiction play that can credibly be produced on a shoestring, please let me know.

Finally, I'd like to thank Ann Cecil and Greg Armstrong for reliably getting *Sigma* printed and in the mail every month. As I've settled into my role as editor it's been comforting to know that a mechanism is in place to get each issue from my iMac to your mailbox without any need for me to interfere. It has allowed me to focus on continuing to make *Sigma* better.

Triangulation Submission Guidelines

Here are the submission guidelines, for *Triangulation*, the annual collection of short fiction by Parsec members. The deadline is March 31st:

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.



Books

Revelation Space

by

Alastair Reynolds

reviewed by David Brody

Working from a list in the December, 2003 *Locus*, my pursuit of the “New Weird” continues. In the January issue, I reviewed M. John Harrison’s brilliant far-future/near-future novel, *Light*. This wasn’t, strictly speaking, on the list, but it should have been (and I’m rereading Harrison’s *Viriconium* series when it comes in the mail). I’ve already read Meville’s *Perdido Street Station* and its sequel *The Scar* and I’m desperately searching for Justina Robson’s *Natural History* which Amazon UK couldn’t get. In the meantime I zipped through Alastair Reynold’s entertaining, but flawed, *Revelation Space*.

Revelation Space is a set in a 26th century deep space universe in which the interstellar space is traversed by vast near-lightspeed spacecraft call lighthuggers. As you might guess this causes a difference in the speed that time passes between those that travel in space and their planet bound fellow humans. Reynolds cleverly incorporates this paradox into his story, even to the point of making it a part of each chapter heading in a way that adds an interesting non-linear element to the way that the story unfolds.

The central character, Dan Sylveste, is a member of the leadership class of Chasm City on the distant planet Yellowstone. He is a scientist and explorer now obsessively digging up the ruins of a long dead civilization on Resurgam, one of civilization’s most distant colonies.

Ana Khouri is a former soldier, now working as a legally sanctioned assassin back in Chasm City. She is hired to travel to Resurgam and do away with Sylveste. Khouri hitches a ride on board a lighthugger crewed by a machine enhanced crew with their own plans for Sylveste.

Separate agendas collide among the deadly artifacts of several alien species, some long extinct, others still very much with us.

It’s well paced and exciting. Events move quickly, especially in the early chapters and the characters develop in often gripping ways. The prose is readable, but occasionally awkward in the way first novels sometimes are. The climax is satisfying, but only to a point. You would know that *Revelation Space* had a sequel even if it didn’t say so on the inside cover.

I also, found that the author seemed to have the odd conviction that humanity’s knowledge of the physics of the universe will always largely be as we understand them today. Reynolds is an astronomer with the European Space Agency (shh...don’t talk about the Beagle) and much of the book is focused on the effects of relativistic physics. I suppose that what I mean is that I wish *Revelation Space* felt more weird that it does. The one thing that I’ve learned

February Minutes

PARSEC held its February meeting on the 14th, Valentine's Day at the East Liberty branch of the Carnegie Free Library of Pittsburgh. Members reported no problems in following directions for finding the library, but some confusion about finding parking. The lot immediately between Beatty St. and the library is expensive: a quarter per half hour, with a limit of 4 hours. The change machine doesn't work, though the library will cheerfully give change. The librarian will also explain what is not obvious: the lot across Beatty, while slightly farther from the library, is much cheaper. For \$1.50, you get up to seven hours on the meter.

The room used for the meeting (on the second floor) was about the size of the 'half' we were often restricted to at Squirrel Hill. The acoustics were fine, and the pizza (brought by our new President, Kevin Geiselman, as promised) was tasty. It was really nice not to have to take out the trash at the end, too. This is all fortunate, since we are going to be at this venue for most of this year.

Genevra Littlejohn, whom many remember from last year, made a visit with her English fiancée in tow; his name is Dan, and his hair certainly brightened the scene.

The meeting proper was started with Geis doing Klingon musical routines to get attention. There were a truly amazing number of announcements. The first was Ann Cecil, explaining the parking lot situation to all those who hadn't discovered the cheaper lot. The second was brought about by Chris Ferrier, who asked for an update on the 501-C3 progress. In Kevin Hayes' absence, Ann Cecil explained that the by-laws have not been rewritten yet, but he's working on it.

Before another announcement could be made, Greg Armstrong jumped in with the Treasurer's Report: we took in \$290, disbursed \$194.80, and made \$180 since the last meeting.

Announcement number three was Barbara Carlson, reminding all that the Triangulations deadline is March 31. There was a discussion about whether Triangulations counts as a publication, and would disqualify an entry from the short-story contest. Barbara said she will look at contest entries only if she doesn't have enough and then contact the author.

David Brody, the new editor of SIGMA, announced that we have found the cause of the shrinking, so the next issue will have larger text. He reminded everyone that the submission deadline is the 25th; that's meant to be a drop dead date, it would be good to have submissions earlier, please.

Nils Hammer asked if anyone knew of papers on the essence of nerdhood, particularly female nerds. Diane Turnshek wants to add a new feature to SIGMA: a member of the month interview. She is volunteering to do the interviews. No one volunteered to be a subject.

The next meeting is March 13th: Geis is deserting to attend a comiccon in Cranberry. The April meeting will feature some folks from Tarentum who run a

self-publishing business. We asked them to explain why anyone would use their services, and they agreed to do a presentation. The May meeting will be an Art Show and Tell – a chance for PARSEC artists (or close friends) to come and show us what they've been up to lately. Sasha Riley is coordinating [neo_vero@yahoo.com].

Diane Turnshek announced that her newest story sale is for a coffee can. The beginning of the story will be on the outside of the can, with the rest inside. They paid 15 cents/word!

Geis did a review of upcoming movie openings. The raffle was held, Kim Eklund won and took a book.

Speaker Michael A. Arnzen introduced himself. He teaches at Seton Hill University; one of his duties includes working with students in the graduate program in Genre Literature. The program has been going for six years, and the biggest group are science fiction authors. Their most successful graduate to date is Nalo Hopkinson, who wrote *The Salt Roads* as part of the program. Steven Piziks (who also writes as Stephen Harper – fantasy for ROC) is another grad. Maybe 7 or 8 students out of the 75 are focused on the horror genre.

Arnzen sees horror as part of the fantasy genre. He attributes this to his dark sense of humor. "When anything can happen [as in fantasy], then dark things come."

He considered titling his talk: "Less is More." His first novel, the award-winning *Grave Markings* is being reissued from Delirium in leather as a limited edition. After he wrote the novel, he found it hard to go back to writing short fiction. He likes to use genre fiction to experiment, so he has been training himself to write shorter by developing gorelets. "Gorelets", he explained, are sized to fit on the palm pilot screen. Initially he challenged himself to write one a week for a year, posting them on his website. He provided illustrations to go with the gorelet – some form of poetry. Fairwood Press (they publish *Tailbones*) is bringing out a trade paperback collection of the gorelets, using his illustrations. Arnzen read several of the gorelets to the assembled PARSEC members.

Arnzen noted that he sees a very thin line between poetry and prose in short forms. He then went on to discuss his new book, called 100 Jolts, which contained flash fiction. Arnzen defines flash fiction as anything under 1500 words, and entertained the audience by reading 4 or 5 of the pieces from the book [e.g., Tom's Now Tomato Juice].

There was a brief discussion of the differences between dark fantasy and horror, with the audience participating. Since Arnzen was accommodating and receptive to the group, there had been questions asked and answered as part of the talk, and it ran a little longer than the usual. PARSEC thanked Mike Arnzen, and disbursed to attend to parking meters.

A small group (seven) members went off to the nearby Sharp Edge for an after-meeting bite to eat and further discussion.

(The minutes this week are by Ann Cecil substituting for Bill Covert, whose daughter was ill and hopefully is now better.)

EerieCon 6

APRIL 16-17-18, 2004

GOH: Larry Niven

Horror GOH: Brian Lumley **Fantasy GOH:** Anne Bishop

Guests Include: Carolyn Clink, Lynn Flewelling,
James Alan Gardner, Paul Levinson, John-Allen Price,
Tony Ruggiero, Robert J. Sawyer, Darrell Schweitzer,
Josepha Sherman, Edo Van Belkom, Pat York

Music: Ookla the Mok

EerieCon is a regional convention devoted to all aspects of horror, fantasy, and science fiction! EerieCon 6 is dedicated to the memory of the late Harry Stubbs (best known as Hal Clement) who was a "regular" at past EerieCons and is sorely missed.

Programming includes:

- Meet the Guests – hosted by Rob Sawyer.
- Interviews with Brian Lumley, Larry Niven, Anne Bishop.
- Buffalo Time Council 20th Anniversary Party Friday night.
- What Line's Mine (hilarious game show).

Features include:

- 24 hr Video room.
- Tarot card readings in Dealer's Room.
- Gaming – Full slate, including Game of Thrones prize tournament, D&D tournament, miniature games such as Celtos, Piquet, Full Thrust, Drunken Orc Barroom Brawl, Clay-o-Ramma, plus open gaming.
- Con Suite – Debby, Scott & Amy's Classic Devilishly Delicious & Lushly Liquidou Pleasure Dome – available during the weekend.
- Art Show and Auction, Autograph sessions, People & Thing Auction, Huckster Room, Cheese Doodle Sculpture Contest, Masquerade, and Casino gambling nearby.

Days Inn at the Falls

443 Main Street,

Niagara Falls, NY 14301

Phone 716-284-8801

(do NOT use the Days Inn 800 number)

Rooms: sngl/dbl \$75, trpl \$85, quad \$95

Memberships: Adult (13&up): \$35 til March 16, \$40 thereafter

Children: \$1/year through age 12

Info: BUFFALO FANTASY LEAGUE PO Box 412, Buffalo NY 14226

eeriecon@juno.com. Website: www.Eeriecon.org

[Note: Dorsai Irregulars provide security, and Pittsburgh's first Dorsai will be there!]

Letter to the Editor

This is in response to the editor's comments of the Feb. issue:

I agree with the political analysis the editor put forth. Part of the problem is that many space programs take longer to plan, fund, build, launch, and reap the benefits of, than most presidencies last. Since too many things in government are done for political gain, then what is the point of doing something that will outlast you? It's ironic that this is the exact motivation behind the great pyramids and other human accomplishments. We have become a disposability-minded culture.

My disagreement is about the hopeless state of the manned space program. To paraphrase the classic wisdom, a journey of a long distance begins with the first step. That is the problem, that first step. Making it that first 100 miles to the edge of space is the biggest obstacle. Launch failures still plague every country that tries to send up a payload. It is very difficult to build a machine that cannot be fully tested before use, is used only once (thus mistakes cannot be corrected for next time), and is destroyed and thus hinders any failure analysis.

What is needed is reusable access to orbit. The Space Shuttle (or STS) was an admirable but flawed attempt at this. That flaw was the attempt to push too many technologies into a single "do a little of everything, for everyone, but no one thing well" vehicle. The result was an overly complex vehicle that is high maintenance, expensive to operate, and whose dynamics are still not completely understood. Additionally, billions were spent on related projects such as the Pacific Coast military launch site, the Centaur upper stage, and the manned maneuvering unit (MMU), the first two of which were all but completed but never used. The last was used but mothballed and could have, in theory, been used to check for heat shield damage in last year's tragedy. It's unknown that anything could have been done to save the Columbia and crew, but NASA has a long history of coming up with creative solutions when the problem is known. The biggest problem with the shuttle is that it is still launched as a partially disposable rocket. Both shuttle losses had to do with this rocket launch phase of its operation.

There are some new technologies on the horizon that might change things. One is the aero-spike design that uses a radically different rocket engine nozzle shape. Another is the SCRAM engine whose first two letters stand for "supersonic combustion", revealing some of how it works. Yet another new technology is called the pulse detonation engine, which is hoped to achieve a pulsed, rather than continuous, form of supersonic combustion. Sadly, like so many other post-cold-war projects that lack an immediate military use, these technology developments are on minimal-life-support level funding.

If we would push to develop such new technologies and avoid the "one vehicle to do everything" design then we could have a space transportation system that the Shuttle hoped to fulfill. The X-Prize competition for free enterprise developers to achieve reusable manned flight to 62.5 miles altitude might see success

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