

PARSEC Meeting Schedule

March 11, 2006

Time: 2 PM
Topic: Brainstorming for Confluence: Help create/develop ideas for Confluence programming and events.
Location: Carnegie Library, Squirrel Hill Branch

April 8, 2006

Time: 2 PM
Topic: Art Show and Tell. Bring your art (painting, sculpture, photography, CGI and more) to talk about creativity and techniques. There will also be a vote to determine the cover art for the Parsec 2007 calendar.
Location: Carnegie Library, Squirrel Hill Branch

May 13, 2006

Time: 2 PM?
Topic: Field Trip to NASA's Glenn Research Center. Details of where we will be meeting to begin our car pool to follow. Museum admission is limited to US Citizens so bring identification (although the website does not make it clear what ID is needed beyond a State issued drivers license, which is in itself not proof of US citizenship.)

Scribble picture on page 8 by Kevin Hayes
Cover photos by Loopy Louie

PARSEC

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

President - Kevin Geiselman Vice President - Shaun Lawson
Treasurer - Sarah-Wade Smith Secretary - Janette Shafer
Commentator - Ann Cecil

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

Meetings - Second Saturday of every month.

Dues: \$10 Full Member, \$2 Associate Member

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



SIGMA

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View From the Top

The President's Column - Kevin Geiselman

I use a program called Book Collector (<http://www.collectorz.com/book/>) to keep track of my over 1,500 books. It's pretty neat in that I can just enter the book's ISBN number and it will go out to the web and pull all the details, including covers, into my database.

With the decision that June's meeting will be a "Favorites of 2005" topic with Hugo awards in mind, I got to thinking what I had been reading in 2005. (Or at least, purchasing). My program can filter by year and statistics if I properly categorized things, so It's fairly easy to just click a few buttons and have it tell me.

In 2005 I added 80 books to my collection. The total cover price for those books were \$1,232 but I only paid \$839. Most were purchased at Phantom of the Attic Comics in Oakland, with Edward R. Hamilton Discount Booksellers (mail order) second and Amazon.com coming in third. My single largest single day purchase was 10 from Sun Books on Rodi Road. They were going out of business and softcovers were \$1 while hardcovers were \$2.

Of the 80 books, only 32 of the books were fiction, falling into the categories of science fiction, fantasy and one horror book (*The Essential Frankenstein*). And most of those, 25 actually, were graphic novels. And of those, most were Japanese manga. (With four collections of *Excel Saga* being the most common.)

The non-fiction books were mostly reference books including a significant number of *National Audubon Society Field Guides*. Hiking and bike trail guides were also well represented. There are also a number of natural history essay books. Eight of the non-fiction books were about science fiction, with some impressive academic titles like *A Critical History and Filmography of Toho's Godzilla Series* and *Proceedings of the International H.G. Wells Symposium*.

Of the readable books (this excludes the *Audubon Field Guides* and the 1,100 page *CRC Handbook of Chemistry and Physics 61st Edition*, which really can't be read cover to cover), I have actually read most of them. Of course, the graphic novels and manga was read quickly when obtained on New Comics Day.

Three books stand out from that list because they are not only the most memorable but also seem to outline a theme to my reading preferences for the year. *The Lost Explorer* is about Mallory's failed 1924 expedition to climb Everest and the finding of his body on the mountain in 1999. *Touching the Void* chronicles the story of Joe Simpson, left for dead on a South American mountain and the three day ordeal of his bringing himself down. *Between A Rock and A Hard Place* is the autobiography of rock and mountain climber Aron Ralson

continued on page 11

Through the darkness he walked
rhythmic steps in the sand
drew us from the southern lands,
a plaster cast of a spirit's footfall
looked flat and blank like a drink coaster.
Light bent around corners by
subtrifugal force along a perfect diabola,
quantum propelling itself across the gap.
Quantum quarks collected in lambent clusters.
Stars flung scatter shot in silver disarray
across the sable silk of night,
but the rising memory, like a dark chocolate Ganesh
would not be denied,
ever so slowly it flows down the skin,
it ends now where is also begins.
the fairy stood there staring,
a dress of flowers she was wearing.
Her breaths swayed forward,
full and ripe for his touch.
As she turns, as she turns,
she was inexorably drawn toward the singularity.
Earth engulfed the poor children
before mere hunger summoned them to darkness.
And so he threw her over the bridge
and watched her writhe until she became a corpse.
Drink this wine of wonder
among the stars.
Dreams of wizards and faeries and such
can't be of importance, much.

Geis - continued from page 2

who, trapped by an 800 pound boulder in a Utah canyon, cut off his own hand to escape.

I'm not sure whether there is anything to be made of these three books taken together in the context of the hiking and biking trail guides I've gotten and my desire to get outdoors more. Two of the three were bought as part of Sun Book's going out of business sale so I was just getting everything that looked good. On the other hand, they were incredibly compelling stories and didn't fail to have relevance to my outdoor experience.

What I didn't read was much literary science fiction. Does this represent a shift in my reading habits or is it merely a quirk of statistics? Is \$1,200 worth of books in a year a lot of money? For most people, it's probably a huge number. For us, maybe not so much. Eighty books is a lot to find space for on already full shelves. Most of my purchases for last year are stacked on a table in the library and on the floor behind the chair.

I estimate that I have over 2,700 comic books that could be worth more than \$10,000. I have a program for that, too but I haven't input the data yet.

January & February Meetings Minutes

Janette Schafer

Treasurer's Report: Nothing to report from the new treasurer and she has just received the bank statements.

Confluence. Many vendors have confirmed and things are going well.

Calendar: The 2007 calendar theme is "Instruments of Madness." Deadline for submitting artwork is April 1. Please send interesting SF dates for calendar. Submit them to Parsec talk. Artwork should be 8 1/2 x 11 with bleedroom. 2006 calendars still available for purchase, so don't miss out!

Play auditions have occurred. Play is cast, but we still need volunteers to help with props, sets, technical needs, etc. We would love to have you!

After next Parsec meeting, there may be a book signing at the Squirrel Hill Barnes and Noble for Eric's new book on the important women of science fiction. It will begin at 5 PM. Please come out and show your support.

Alpha prep is going well. Featured writers are Tamora Pearce and Timothy Zahn.

Ligonier Valley Poetry writers are looking for students...look up their webpage.

There is a writing camp at Pitt for young people from 7/10 to 7/21 called the Writing Project. Look up their webpage for further details.

David Brody says thanks for the support shown for the William Tenn project. He also reports that some interviews have been confirmed.

The writer's retreat in Harper's Ferry went extremely well. Many of the participants have reported productive results. There is some talk about making this an annual/bi-annual event.

Filk news: Randy reported that the last filk night raised \$70 more towards the purchase of a stereo system. The next filk nights will be March 18 and May 13. See Randy for more details. If you would like to donate money apart from the filk nights, see Randy. the stereo system will be used to enhance the filk concerts we enjoy at Confluence.

This meeting, we were pleased to have our first Parsec Poetry meeting. Poetry is the verse of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. Our featured Parsec poets were Ann Cecil, Eric Davin, Kevin Hayes, Randy Hoffman, Barton Paul Levenson, Janette Patterson Schafer, Elizabeth Penrose, Jodi Shulick, and Diane Turnshek. These poets presented a wonderful afternoon of poetry and mainstream poetry. In addition, we were pleased to have a large turnout for the reading. Towards the end of the reading, we opened the floor to the audience for those who wanted to share some of their work. We enjoyed their poems as well.

A Parsec first, we wrote a group poem. *An Exquisite Corpse* is a surrealist poem from the Dada school. To write this type of poem, each person participating writes a line of poetry. Then, a poem is pieced together from everyone's lines. The Surrealists say that this type of poem shows how people are connected to each other and how wonderful works can come about even if you don't see the lines written by everyone else. Here is the poem written by the members present:

An Exquisite Corpse

In my sleep, I dreamed a wizard stretched out his hands to cast a spell,
Pieces of Eight, why must I wait?
I met Orion on the road,
cold freezing teeth clamped hard around my leg.



Reviews

Books

The Road to Mars, A Post Modern Novel

by Eric Idle

review by Larry Ivkovich

As a corny joke and bad pun lover, I couldn't resist a book with lines like "How long is a piece of string theory?" and "I have a book, *The Joy of Gravity-Free Sex* but I fell off the bed reading it," and "Oh dear, what can the dark matter be?" Still, I expected the novel itself to only be better than a poke in the eye with a sharp stick (the novel's two protagonists would love that criticism!). Honestly, I bought *The Road to Mars*, published in 1999, out of sheer curiosity (being an old Monty Python fan myself). Imagine my surprise to find it a very well written and extremely fun read.

Alex Muscroft and Lewis Ashby, along with their human-looking robot servant, Carlton, are working the galactic comedy circuit known as the Road to Mars in the far, far future. Carlton, as a non-human, has no sense of humor or understanding of the concept. Yet he studies his two masters' routines diligently and researches all comedy and comedians from the late 20th century. He eventually (according to the narrator, the mysterious micropaleontologist, Bill Reynolds) writes a serious tome on the subject called *De Rerum Comoedia*. This includes a section describing the "very weird" and "stupid" comedy troupe, Monty Python's Flying Circus and the mechanical author's breakthrough theory that "levity" is the fourth guiding principle of the universe right behind gravity.

Alex and Lewis, in the meantime, just try to make ends meet as Alex avoids his various ex-girlfriends (all the while making new ones) while Lewis tries to see more of his daughter from an early marriage.

The two comics attempt to make a living doing standup (Lewis is the straight man or "white face comic" and Alex is the jokester or "red face comic," according to Carlton's observations) at clubs in space stations or in colonies in the asteroid belt. As a result, through a series of mishaps, they manage to get swept up in a mysterious conspiracy inspired by the centuries old (to them) British Gunpowder Plot (of Guy Fawkes fame).

Running afoul of Emil Keppler, a rich businessman up to no good, and his henchmen (one of whom is a rival comedian) the two comics and their robot run, hide, run some more, get captured, escape, help damsels in distress and finally save the day. Whoops, I hope I haven't given too much away here!

Idle has written a sharp commentary on comedy with some satirical jabs at society in general by tying it up neatly in a witty future adventure. His writing style is tight and descriptive--his describing a space station having the atmosphere sucked out of it due to a structural failure is actually pretty vivid and gripping. His dialog and jokes (and there are a lot of those, including quotes by

“ancient” comedians like Woody Allen and Lenny Bruce) are well done and the characters, though not completely three dimensional, are, dare I say it yet again, funny.

The narrative is interspersed with brief observations by Reynolds which tend to add to the general wackiness and/or confusion of the story. All in all, while Idle is no Terry Pratchett or Douglas Adams, his style is unique and humorous in its own right and quite enjoyable. I recommend this one, but if you don't want to read it, you can just go ahead and poke yourself in the eye with a sharp stick instead.

Television

Tune In For Toons
by Diane McCarty

If you haven't watched Saturday morning cartoons for a while, you are missing some real treats. So, be sure to grab the TV Guide, and wake up and smell the Cheerios this weekend.

To start, on FOX we have *Magical DoReMi*. Elementary school girl Dorrie accidentally turned a witch into a small green blob. Now she is trying to learn enough magic to turn this cranky new mentor back to normal. Meanwhile, her friends Reanne and Mirabell help her run the magic shop after school. A very cute show with a sing-a-long at the end of each episode.

Next on WB we have *The Batman*. The Commish's daughter Barb is in on the action this season. She brings a bit of levity to the show which began with police chasing the newly arrived Batman almost as much as the crooks. Be sure to set your VCR or TIVO, because FOX also has more anime at the same time.

MewMew Power is next up. It's based on the manga *Tokyo Mew Mew*, and is all about a group of girls who get superpowers from endangered animals. They team up to save the earth from invading aliens who mutate animals and people.

Family Channel is also in on the fun with *Kong: The Animated Series*. Here, a descendant of the famous Kong and his human companions battle evil. A power hungry professor has stolen some the magical Primal Stones from Kong Island, allowing ancient demons to surface. DNA merger tech lets humans fuse with animals, leading to lots of giant monster battles.

It's back to FOX next for *The Winx Club*. Earth girl Bloom learns she isn't from earth at all. She is a fairy princess from the planet Sparks, and her "winx" -- her magic -- is the powerful Dragonfire. Now her High School is a fairy boarding school with more magic than Hogwarts, and her boyfriend is a hero-in-training. This season the trio of witches who were after Bloom's power are back and meaner than ever as Lord Darkheart's new evil minions. Bloom and her fairy friends, though, are buddying up with a new fairy BFF and tiny pixie sidekicks.

Boskone Review

Ann Cecil

Boskone has now survived being back in Boston for four years in a row. The latest incarnation was held February 17-19, 2006 at the Sheraton Boston, right in downtown. It is a pleasant hotel, with wide corridors, well-appointed meeting rooms, and comfortable couches in the con suite. I enjoy the con a great deal more now that it has lost the "rat-in-a-maze" feel that shuffling through the narrow corridors in the Framingham hotel gave it.

The Guest of Honor was Ken MacLeod, whose Scottish accent gave a different flavor to many of the panels. This year, Boskone seemed to have trimmed back their guest list a bit, but used the remaining guests more. This meant that attendees had six or seven opportunities to see and hear MacLeod (or Wen Spencer, and Tamora Pierce, among others), which I found a refreshing change.

The best title for panels was "Paying the Piper at the Gates of Dawn" which turned out to be a panel on writing about confrontations with Gods (or gods or even ghod). The ensuing discussion revealed more about the panelist's personalities than writing techniques. One suggested using light motifs to describe the numinous (i.e., godly) character; another suggested the evocation of extreme happiness in the human; and a third suggested evocation of extreme fear in the human.

The panelists on "What I do When I Should be Writing" decided that a more helpful approach was to talk about what they did to push themselves back into writing, and produced an interesting and useful discussion, both in terms of writing and any other activity that induces procrastination.

The Art show had the usual mix of beautiful, effective works way beyond my price range and smaller amateurish works I wouldn't buy anyway. Donato Giancola was the artist guest of honor; his works are clearly worth what he's asking, and he is a friendly and charming gentleman besides. The Dealer's room looked, as usual, much like the one at Confluence (i.e., dominated by books, which I don't find a bad thing).

While the bar seemed to be a little short of beer, people attending literary beers coped by buying mixed drinks (the margarita was served in a large glass and generously salted). There were actually more literary beers than KaffeeKlatsches, by my count (which may not be accurate, however. See Margarita size, above).

All in all, Boskone was worth the drive (9 1/2 hours each way). The weather was much more cooperative this year; neither the trip up nor the one back were as memorable as last year (i.e., neither blizzard nor massive accidents). I came away with some ideas and met some new people, all the qualifications I use.



Announcements (& More)

• Alpha, the SF/F/H Workshop¹ for Young Writers, is open for applications until March 31, 2006. Guest authors include Tamora Pierce, Wen Spencer, Dora Goss and Timothy Zahn. Twenty students will be chosen for the ten day residency workshop in Greensburg, PA, from July 19 to 28, 2006.

Students fourteen to nineteen years old must submit a genre story to complete their application. <http://alpha.spellcaster.org/>

•Eric Leif Davin will be signing and discussing his new book, *Partners in Wonder: Women and the Birth of Science Fiction, 1926-1965*, on Saturday, March 11. The signing & discussion will take place at 5 p.m. at the Squirrel Hill Barnes & Noble bookstore. Please drop by after the Parsec meeting!

As an example of one of talented women that Eric's book has helped to rediscover, hereis one of the poems he read at the last Parsec meeting:

Treasure of Mars
(1951 – from *Wine of Wonder*)
by

Lilith Lorraine

He left behind the moon-tossed seas of earth
To seek a treasure hid on ancient Mars,
He circled twice her cold and crimson girth,
Then landed, laughing upward at the stars.
For he had heard it whispered in the gleam
Of many a space-port's dim-lit rendezvous
How Mars concealed a treasure so supreme,
That, had she found it when her empires grew
Barbaric in their arrogance and might,
She would have ruled the system, and the new
And swaggering earth would be her satellite.
But now at last he came, the plunderer
Forcing the ravaged planet to reveal
Her holiest treasure in its sepulcher,
Mapped by a chart he'd shed brave blood to steal.
Dying, he stumbled through the rust-red waste,
And hacked exhausted through the sterile sand,
Then reached into the hold with lustful haste.
And gurgling water flowed across his hand.

Cartoon Network has good offerings, too. *Ben 10* is about a boy who finds an alien armband that becomes quite attached to him. This armband gives him the temporary ability to turn into one of ten different alien forms to battle assorted monsters, aliens, and baddies.

Dragon Hunters is a rather comical series that takes place on a "planet" made up of islands floating in the sky. Manchu, Guido, and their blue whatsit pet travel from place to place looking for people to hire them to kill dragons. They aren't picky about the type of monster they battle, they just hope that this time they get paid.

WB has *Loonatics Unleashed*. Centuries in the future, super powered descendants of the loony toons gang battle evil super villains.

Also on WB is *Johnny Test*. Johnny and his talking dog serve as guinea pigs for his Dexter like twin sisters. In return, the girls give him access to scientific experiments that do work.

Last, but not least by any means, is *W.I.T.C.H.* on Family Channel and Disney. It is about five girls who become The Guardians Of The Veil -- the veil between worlds that is. Wilma, Irma, Taranee, Cornelia, and Haylin use a magical necklace and the power of the elements to keep evil prince Phoebos at bay. Meanwhile, Phoebos is out to steal his sister's magic power. His sister turns out to be Cornelia's best friend, but Phoebos' lies make her think the guardians are the evil ones.

There are also great cartoons on both Friday and Saturday nights, too. On Fridays Cartoon Network has *Foster's Home For Imaginary Friends*. Outgrown that Imaginary friend? Send them to Madam Foster's (Foster) Home. Mac, however, wants to keep his relationship with his friend Blooregard Q. If he visits every day, Bloo won't be put up for adoption.

Nickelodeon has *Avatar: The Last Airbender* on Friday nights and Sunday mornings. Young Aang is the current incarnation of the Avatar, master of all four elements, who keeps peace between the four peoples. Unfortunately, he has been in suspended animation for the last hundred years. This has allowed the Fire Nation to start a war for total domination, starting with the slaughter of the Air Nomads. Now Aang (with the help of the Water Tribe brother and sister who found him) seeks to master the four elements, and fulfill the duty he shunned in the past.

Saturday nights, Cartoon Network has the brand new *Wu Lin Warriors*, a very interesting show. It is produced in the style of Bunkaru -- ancient Japanese puppet theater. Warriors Lone Sword and Scar are out to stop Scarab, a former warrior bent on revenge for being rejected from the dojo.

Wrapping up Cartoon Network's Saturday night, I have five words for you: *JUSTICE ... LEAGUE ... UNLIMITED ... IS ... BACK!* Need I say more? I think not.

Space Report

Henry Tjernlund

It's been several months since I have written a Space Report. In that time the NASA Gravity Probe B has finished its mission making high precision measurements of its orbit around Earth in order to try and verify one of Einstein's General Theory of Relativity's subtle effects called "Frame Dragging." Analysis of the mission's data is underway, and one article claimed that it may take about 6 months to perform. If so, we may have an answer in several months.

Stardust returned back to Earth in January to a safe parachute landing. It's aerogel panels seemed to have been successful at collecting dust particles from comet Wild 2 which the probe encountered in January 2004. The mission was launched in February 1999.

The New Horizons mission to Pluto launch in January. Seems that there were some significant comings and goings that month. New Horizon's 9 year trip includes a sling-shot gravity assist around Jupiter (February 2007) and it's primary mission flyby of Pluto in July 2015.

At the time of this writing the Saturn Cassini probe is closing in to make another (its 12th) flyby of the cloud shrouded moon Titan. A complete picture of Titan's surface is steadily emerging with each (almost monthly) flyby.

About the time that members get this issue of Sigma, the Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter (Launched in August, 2005) will be just getting to Mars. However, it will be about 6 more months (August, 2006) until it's orbit is nudged and finalized and the MRO begins its from-orbit observation science mission.

In April the European's (ESA) Venus Express orbiter will be arriving at its destination. Launched in November 2005 the VE orbiter will be the latest explorer to that planet since the early 1990's NASA Magellan mission. Unlike Magellan, which radar mapped the surface, the VE orbiter has instruments for studying the planet's runaway greenhouse atmosphere.

Even China is getting into robotic exploration with their Chang'e-1 lunar orbiter planned for launch next year. A Chinese robotic lunar lander is planned for 2012.

It might seem that all is grand with planetary science missions. But the future of new missions has actually turned rather gloomy.

The once ambitious Jupiter Icy Moons Orbiter (JIMO, also called Prometheus, planned for 2015) that was to take turns orbiting each of Jupiter's four largest moons (Io, Europa, Ganymede, and Callisto), had been scaled back to a single moon (Europa) mission. However, even that curtailed mission has been placed on indefinite hold, which some say basically means that it is canceled.

The Mars Telecommunication Orbiter has also been put on indefinite hold

(canceled). This mission was to support the next generation of super-sized Mars rover, the Mars Science Laboratory (MSL). It is not known at this time if this means that the MSL rover (to have been paired with the MTO) is still in development, originally having been planned for 2009 launches. So far the Phoenix polar lander, for launch in 2007, (stationary lander, not a rover) still seems to be a "go." Hopefully at least this will survive the current ragin budget battle.

Yet another mission put on indefinite hold, is the specialized Terrestrial Planet Finder (TPF) orbiting telescope that hoped to detect Earth sized planets around other stars. Originally planned for a 2012-2015 launch and mentioned in a 2004 (election year) presidential speech, this item has been dropped from the 2007 federal budget.

And if that does not seem bad enough, the announced 2007 budget calls for a deep 50% outright cut in NASA's astrobiology and related pure science research.

It is understandable that in national budgets some issues have priority over others. Especially with a war going on. However, the Bush administration seemed to strongly support space exploration with the "Moon, Mars, and Beyond" initiative during the last presidential election year. Were they serious, or was it just campaign rhetoric intended to swing special interest votes for a close election? The change of direction, with delays and mission cancellations, would seem to support the latter. There was no mention of any "Moon, Mars, and Beyond" space exploration support in the last State of the Union address.

I usually try to keep politics out of these articles, but canceling and even delaying missions can have long term effects. Missions take years to plan. More years to build. Some missions, such as the Pluto New Horizons, have been 15 or more years in development. And for a long distance mission like New Horizons, the people who got things started may be retired by the time the mission reaches its goal. Mission delays mean reduced project budgets and the loss of personnel and expertise that is needed to optimize success. Although delays save money in the short term, they make those very same missions more expensive in the long term. Additionally, missions cannot be launched just anytime. Sometimes rare orbital configurations have to be taken advantage of during limited time launch windows that may not reoccur for years. Space missions are not like other government projects that can endure delays, political infighting, or be fixed later if not done right the first time.

I hope that the SF/F community supports space exploration and continues to do so, openly, vocally.

