PARSEC Meeting Schedule

November 2004
Date: November 13th 2004 - 2 PM
Topic: Book Sale and final nominations for 2005 officers
Location: Allegheny Branch of the Carnegie Library, North Shore

December 2004
Date: December 11th 2004 - 2 PM
Topic: Holiday Party
Location: Ann Cecil’s house in Dormont

January 2005
Date: January 8th 2005 - 2 PM
Topic: Art Show and Tell
Location: East Liberty Branch of Carnegie Library

Please note that the November Parsec meeting is at the Allegheny Regional branch of 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

In This Issue:
Eric Davin Goes to Rod Serling's Hometown
The President's Column - Kevin Geiselman

Acres of Books

When I was young, my grandfather wanted all his grandchildren to read *Acres of Diamonds* by Russell H. Conwell. Conwell was a lawyer, Baptist minister, decorated Civil War officer, and founder of Temple University. Robert Shackleton took inspiration from Conwell and wrote a biography of him. *Acres of Diamonds* is the text of his oft-repeated lecture on the virtues of earning money through honest, hard work. Christian Capitalism. However, I actually remember nothing of the book itself except the title and the $20 my grandfather paid me to read it. To my grandfather, reading was something you did to gain knowledge. I never knew him to read for pleasure and certainly never saw him read any fiction.

I also remember that at the same time I also read Arthur C. Clarke's 2001: *A Space Odyssey* and its precursor, "The Sentinel". I remember it was hardcover with that clear plastic the libraries put on to protect them. I remember the cover art. I remember sitting on the back porch while reading it during a warm weekend afternoon.

My freshman year at college, I borrowed some books from my father. A stack of James Bond novels by Ian Fleming and *The Tracker*, a non-fiction book by Tom Brown. Oakland had something I was not used to seeing in my hometown of Irwin; used bookstores, so I hit on the idea of not only building a complete collection of Bond books for myself but completing my father’s collection. I also accidentally lost *The Tracker* and spent months combing the bookstores attempting to replace it.

Both when I presented the complete James Bond collection and the replacement *Tracker*, my father said, "No, you can keep them."

How did I end up so different from my family? To them, a book is a transient thing, to read and then discard. Even my grandfather didn't actually own a copy of *Acres of Diamonds* for us to read. But somehow I developed a different attitude towards books that had me keeping them. Some I would go back and read again and again. *The Lord of the Rings* and *War of the Worlds* were those that I would read at least once a year. And they would collect. Dozens. Hundreds. Thousands. Filling boxes, bookcases and just about every horizontal space available.

My book collection has taken on the characteristics of a gas; expanding to fill its container. And for as much as I love and respect books, this growth cannot be allowed to continue. So, I will be weeding some of my books and bringing them to the next meeting. It's a good bet you will be doing something similar. I hate to see them go but I take some comfort in that their sacrifice will be making room for new books.

I'm also taking the sifting opportunity to upload books into my computer database. I purchased a software package from Collectorz.com that works with a bar code reader. I scan in the bar code, it searches Amazon.com (or several other locations) and loads the book into the database along with cover art. It won't scan every book (such as my pre-bar code first edition print of Garrett Serviss' *Edison's Conquest of Mars* (#553 of 1500)) but it will allow me to move fairly quickly through the thousands of books that I have.

After we bought our house, my parents came over for a tour before we moved in. I showed them the living room, dining room, kitchen and so on. "... and this is going to be the library."

"What do you need a library for?"

What, indeed.

This is also a reminder of the other administratia that will be going on at the November meeting. The second round of 2005 officer nominations will take place. So far, it's me for President (again), Sarah-Wade for VP, Joan for Secretary, Greg for Treasurer (again) and Ann for Commentator (again). There is absolutely no competition for any position at this time and it could turn out to be a boring election. Not that it's a wholly bad thing but it would be good to have some choices.

Also, there will be the vote for the new by-laws. By now, everyone should have received a copy and had a chance to read over it. You may notice a few simple errors, typographical or syntactic in nature that are already being worked on. Otherwise, the vote is to accept or reject these by-laws IN THEIR ENTIRETY. No nitpicking; yea or nay. Having carefully read over them myself, I find them to be comprehensive and appropriate and thus recommend that they be approved. We will then be able to move on to the next stage in our quest for 501(c)(3) non-profit status.

"Requiem for a Heavyweight" (1956), and "The Comedian" (1957). And in 1959 he launched a new TV anthology series he'd dreamed up, "The Twilight Zone," for which he was contractually obligated to write the bulk of the stories.

He began churning out stories. And the fifth of the stories he wrote for that first season was "Walking Distance. Serling had gone very far in a very short time. He was only 35-years-old and only 16 years out of high school. But, he was already a veteran of a world war. And he was a success at the profession he had thereafter pursued with much passion. He was an award-winning writer and was honored with his own TV show, which he also hosted. He was at the beginning of his greatest fame, writing stories for millions of viewers each week and for which he would soon win three Hugos between 1960-62.

But was this young man, not that far out of his twenties, already nostalgic for his "warm and comfortable" boyhood, which he remembered as a time of such "well-being"? Given the autobiographical details of "Walking Distance," it is hard not to consider this possibility.

Be careful what you wish for. You might get it.
Second concern - What are the thing that hits us made of? Comets are ice, and burn up, but asteroids are metallic rock. Henry talked about the hypothesis that there is a brown dwarf in the Oort Cloud, causing a rain of comets through the solar system. Some of the other possible explanations involve interactions between the plane of the galaxy and our somewhat eccentric orbit.

Are objects being replenished? And by what? We don't know.

There is plenty of evidence that we do get hit. Moon missions: Moon rocks showed that almost all the craters are from impact. And they go from miles wide to microscopic. Every fly-by has shown impact craters on Venus, Mars, asteroids. Above-ground nuclear testing helped to identify shapes of a comet impact. Levy (author of Comets) used his experience there to identify impacts. (This is the is the Levy of Schumaker-Levy).

Now that we know what to look for: we have identified 200 impact craters on Earth.

Most craters are really old. Is there still danger? Earth collects tons of dust daily, most of which falls through and lands on your windowsill.

Henry then went on to list the sizes, frequency, and effect of various objects hitting us, such as Shooting Stars, Fire Balls, Bolides, and bigger, up to global/mass extinction sized-objects. He talked about the possible impact in the Yucatan that they think extinguished the dinosaurs. The rings of the impact can be seen in satellite photos.

June 30, 1908: Tunguska in Siberia. It was recorded on seismographs around the world, and all of Europe could see fires in the sky. There was widespread damage but no crater. Current thought is that a stony asteroid detonated in the atmosphere and caused the damage which was equivalent to a 100 megaton bomb explosion; hundreds of acres were devastated.

On February 12, 1947, there was a smaller event in Siberia. On August 13, 1930 in the Amazon basin of Brazil: either three closely spaced objects (or one that broke into 3 pieces).

Question of deaths from impacts? Depends on what you classify as an impact event. Example: Chicago Fire - that same night there were fires in several places in Michigan, Wisconsin - in surrounding tri state area. Example: 1490, city in China, stone falls like rain, 10,000 people killed. Fire on the moon being witnessed by monks (not experts, so discounted). 1992, October, Peekskill NY, car hit by meteorite, case with video. 1994 during Gulf War spy satellites detected event in Micronesia. During an 8-10 years period with satellite observations, there were 250-300 explosions in the atmosphere of good-sized objects (equivalent to nuclear events).

A project called Space Guard is watching for things coming our way. Goal is to detect 90% of the asteroids that are big enough to cause continental catastrophes, track and identify by 2008. System called Linear (automated) is ahead of that. This is named for Clarke's group in Rendezvous with Rama.

Meeting broke up at 4:30. Approximately 8 went off to the Sharp Edge after the meeting.
Shaun complains "I think killing my flatmate, my girlfriend and my mother is a bit much for one evening" -- and if that line alone doesn't convince you to go, then I can't help you. And now if you'll excuse me, I need to shamble around, twist my mouth, and gurgle "Grr" intermittently.

Inexplicability Isn't Always Good: Identity, Secret Window, The Forgotten
reviewed by William Blake Hall

Inexplicability: a quality that can evoke reactions ranging from fascination to exasperation. It can be a tool, but it can also be a crutch. In figuring out which is which, you need to do only two things: be sure you're not unfairly prejudiced, and then trust your instincts. Two simple steps, and yet we get lost while taking them all the time -- and hack producers count on that.

Take the inexplicable ending of 2001: A Space Odyssey. (Arthur C. Clarke tries valiantly to explain it all in his novelization, but he's not persuasive.) The ending is arcane, but on a level so ambitious and diverting that it successfully communicates the idea that an advanced alien supercivilization might not be very comprehensible to us at first. That ending by itself sets 2001 far above Disney's The Black Hole or Brian De Palma's Mission to Mars. It is an inexplicability that seems to carry its own internal logic, and that is crucial. I worry, though, that many an audience can't tell that crucial difference, and can be tricked into respecting junk while snubbing jewels.

The Forgotten is the sort of movie I dread, because of the infuriatingly sneaky way movies like it can go on keeping science fiction cinema ghettoized for eternity. We imagine we can tell a bad SF movie purely because of an obvious cheesiness: its superobviously bad science, its cheap sets, its bad actors, the unintentional hilarity of its lines. Yet The Forgotten is also a bad movie, even though there is not that much technically wrong with it. Its tone is consistent, the mystery is okay, there are some genuinely startling moments, and the acting, led by the ever-luminous Julianne Moore, is in earnest.

No, the problem with The Forgotten is that IT HAS NO PREMISE (capitals intended, good editor). It gives away nothing to say that someone mean takes away Moore's boy and that by the end of the movie she gets him back. That's it. That's the whole movie. That's all you'll learn from it. The movie dances around any outright verbal statement that demigodlike aliens are behind the kidnapping, but it might as well, because that giant detail scarcely matters.

There are so many directions you could take an idea like this. You could compare the aliens to gods of ancient mythologies, moving human beings around like chessmen according to their whims; you could have fun investigating destiny and free will. Or, you could use this as an exploration of the UFO abductee subculture. Or, you could use the aliens as a metaphor for humans experimenting on animals. Indeed, such possibilities were what I was hoping for as I watched this, and I am a "mere" audience member.

Nope. Uh-uh. No, they're just gratuitous Mean Mad Scientists From Outer

October Minutes

Ann Cecil

Your Commentator was late to the meeting, but it was reported that David Brody won the raffle and took Mike Arnen's booklets.

Andrew Plotkin proved himself a worthy new member, by bringing fresh-baked delicious cookies.

Nominations for next year's slate of officers were made:

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

The new By-laws (all 14 pages) were distributed. These are the by-laws that should impress the IRS into granting us true non-profit status, allowing us a break on postage, taxes, and other such incentives. We will need to file taxes, unfortunately. Those not present at the meeting will receive copies of the by-laws in the mail, along with a ballot (one for each member or associate member in the household). Sarah Wade pointed out two omissions: Two classes of members (full and associate) were not explained (oops), and limit of membership for those over 18 to those who pay dues should be explicitly stated. Agreement was that those changes will be added to the by-laws mailed, and could be noted on the copies of those present.

Henry Tjernlund presented a talk on "Asteroids, Comets, & Meteorites, Oh My!". He started by lining up his impressive set of 5 reference books: Target Earth, Comets, Asteroid, Rain of Iron and Ice, and Cosmic Pinball.

Initially, he talked about the hazards; in order to estimate the hazards, we have to know what's out there. He listed, on the blackboard, the census of the solar system that was taught when he was young. Now we know about a lot more.

- Vulcanoids (a series of asteroids between Mercury and the Sun).
- NEOs (near-Earth Objects), asteroids orbiting us, fall into 3 groups: ATEN, small, inside Earth's orbit; Apollo, mostly outside Earth's orbit, and Amont, entirely outside Earth's orbit.
- Trojan asteroids - Around Jupiter at stable LaGrange points.
- Pluto - Which probably should not have been called a planet.
- Kuiper Belt - A super-sized asteroid belt; source of a number of comets and other objects; planet-sized objects, still in the plane of the solar system, in a taurus

And more theoretical: The Oort Cloud: a sphere around the solar system

Why is all this important? The Kuiper Belt objects tend to be easier to see. They come in on orbits matching the existing objects (planets), whereas objects from the Oort Cloud are not as predictable. Impact is related to velocity squared (Henry put the equation on the blackboard). So objects going the same way we do have less velocity than objects going against us.
Our Hero finds his hometown all as he remembers it, including the boys playing in the park just as he played in the park as a kid. He finds the familiar old gazebo where he remembers, as a boy, carving his initials into one of the pillars, and he looks for them. (So did I. According to local lore, Rod Serling carved his initials into the gazebo as a boy, just as Our Hero did.) The initials are not where Our Hero remembered them to be. (Nor was I able to find the initials "RS" anywhere on the gazebo.)

Our Hero then walks a few blocks down the street to his boyhood home. It looks much the same. On impulse, he rings the doorbell. And, of course, his long-dead father, looking just as remembered, comes to the door. It seems the frazzled businessman has walked into his past. Our Hero excitedly tells his father that he is the son, grown up. The father (and mother) think the adult stranger at their door is a lunatic and drive him away with threats to call the police.

It is now twilight and Our Hero dejectedly returns to the park. He notices one of the boys playing in the park woods. The boy approaches the gazebo and begins to carve his initials into one of the pillars. Our Hero goes nearer and sees that the boy is carving Our Hero's initials into the post. The boy is Our Hero at a younger age! Our Hero accosts his younger self, frantic to tell him the most important discovery he has learned in all the years since he carved his initials into the park gazebo: These are the best years of your life! Treasure them! Don't be in a hurry to grow up!

The boy thinks the old man is a dangerous loon and runs away. In sadness Our Hero returns through the gloom to his boyhood home, not knowing what else to do. His father is sitting on the front porch smoking a pipe. The old man notices Our Hero and motions him to approach. Our Hero had blurted out such intimate details in their previous encounter that no stranger could have known them. Perhaps, through some miracle, the stranger really is the old man's son, all grown up.

They talk. They share intimacies. The old man declines to ask about the future. But he tells Our Hero that he doesn't belong in "this time." He should return to his own time, knowing what he now knows, and let his younger self grow up in his own way, making his own mistakes.

Our Hero realizes the wisdom of his father's advice and they part, having reached a sort of understanding. Our Hero returns to his commuter train, now repaired and ready, and looks wistfully back down the road to his past, sadder but wiser. His hometown may be within "walking distance," but his past no longer is. That is the way of the world and he accepts it.

There is so much about this story which comes directly out of Serling's life: the neighborhood, the house, the park, the carousel, the gazebo with the initials carved on it. It is tempting, therefore, to think that the emotions and attitudes also came out of Serling's life.

After graduating from Binghamton's Central High School in 1943, Serling joined the army. He became a paratrooper in the Pacific Theater, preparing to jump into Japan in the Big Invasion which was cancelled after Nagasaki. Not long after he returned from the war, he moved to New York City to try to make it as a writer. He scuffled along writing for radio shows and then the nascent medium of television. He worked hard, wrote a lot, and soon began to have some success. He won six Emmies for such teleplays as "Patterns" (1955), Space, and all Moore has to do is really, really, r-e-a-l-l-y want her boy back. That's it, that's all.

Fact is, this could have been much better as non-SF, as a perfectly "mundane" Earthbound thriller. What non-extraterrestrial reasons could there be for so insistent and pervasive, and hideous, a conspiracy? Now, that could have been interesting.

But they went with aliens. And why? Because, it would appear, ALIENS DON'T HAVE TO BE EXPLAINED. (Yes, good editor, I still want my capitals.) They wanted a Bad Thing happening and then, stuck with an actual explanation, decided, "Oh, palm it off as science fiction."

There have been infuriatingly flimsy movies before, movies that aren't even SF but might have been salvaged by a truly clever SF concept. In Identity, we are left to wonder what is happening to poor John Cusack, and then we learn that poor John Cusack is a complete personality trapped as a player-character in a madman's brain. In Secret Window, we are obliged to wait all movie long to be told that John Turturro is an imaginary alter ego of Johnny Depp -- ah, but this isn't handled nearly as well as in Fight Club. These are, in short, movies with barely any premises to work with. It's bad enough when they're "psychological" -- but when I'm expected to give them a passing grade because they're "SF," then I have to protest.

Why must such nothing movies be ground out? Is it purely to keep furiously filling up screens, solely to deny those screens to the movies of competing studios? Or is Hollywood openly admitting that it is really and truly desperate for ideas, or even half-ideas? I look at the interminable ending credits of these things and wonder "Can't any one of these individuals have stood up and said 'Guess what, we can make an actual story out of this?''"

It's bad enough when science fiction is gotten wrong, but that's only half the problem. When stumped mystery hacks say "Ohhh, make it science fiction, because science fiction needs no explanations," that doubles the problem. The Forgotten is not that bad a movie to sit through; that's not the point. The problem is that it should not have been attributed to science fiction -- or any category, for that matter -- until such time as it finally addressed an actual idea.

Stuff

• Mary Soon Lee, author and PARSEC member, and Andrew Moore are the proud parents of Lucy Mairead Lee-Moore. She was born at 8:04 AM on Sept. 13th and weighed 7 lbs. and 2 oz.

• Please note that the photographs used in the cover of the October issue, were courtesy of Laurie Mann. Thanks Laurie!

• From Alan Irving: My CD Goldilocks and Company, a collection of traditional folktales and legends for younger kids, has just won a NAPPA (national parenting publications) Honor Award for Children's Resources, and my latest CD Blood on the Moon, the story of the French and Indian War in Pennsylvania and the Ohio River frontier has just been released.
A Visit to the Twilight Zone

Eric Leif Davin

In early May, 2004, I stepped into the Twilight Zone. Actually, I drove to Binghamton, in upstate New York, just over the Pennsylvania line. For Anita Alverio, who accompanied me, the attraction was the Roberson Museum and Science Center, home of the world’s largest and most eclectic collection of vintage carousel horses. Additionally, the town hosts six additional wood-carved antique carousels at local parks, making it, as it likes to boast, “The Carousel Capital of the World.” All six are listed on both the New York State Historic Register and the National Register of Historic Places.

For myself, however, the attraction was the fact that Binghamton was the boyhood home of Rod Serling, the creator of the pathbreaking early TV show, “The Twilight Zone.” We drove by the Binghamton Central High School, close to the downtown business district, from which Serling graduated in the war year of 1943. A historical marker stands on the tree-studded campus of the old school, noting its most famous graduate. Not far from Serling’s high school is the Forum Theater for the Performing Arts, on Water Street, which houses “Day of a Playwright,” a permanent exhibit of Serling memorabilia. (If you visit and wish to view the photos and items in this exhibit, call 607-778-2480 first and ascertain its hours of operation.)

However, like so many Rust Belt cities, Binghamton is a declining industrial town. Once a thriving shoe manufacturing center at the confluence of the Susquehanna and Chenango Rivers, it lured tens of thousands of Southern and Eastern European immigrants around the turn of the twentieth century. But Binghamton no longer attracts workers, as it seems to have little work, the shoe factory having long since folded. On a Saturday morning we wandered around the downtown business district and had difficulty finding an open store, while there were many boarded up storefronts.

However, we weren’t there Binghamton’s for ethnic or industrial heritage. We were there for Rod Serling and the carousels. The Roberson Museum’s carousel exhibit has an example of every conceivable type of carousel animal. Horses, of course, predominate, both plain and elegant, but other “jumpers” and “prancers” include such farm animals as pigs, dogs, and giant roosters, as well as camels, elephants, gorillas pulling chariots, and fantastical mythological beasts of every description. In addition to the Roberson, there are six still-working antique carousels in the “Triple Cities” (as the locals call Binghamton, Endicott, and nearby Johnson City).

The carousel which interested me the most was the one in Binghamton’s George F. Johnson Recreation Park on Beethoven Street (many of the surrounding streets are also named after classical composers). Installed in 1925, it includes 60 jumping horses, four-abreast; chariots; and the original two-roll Wurlitzer Military Band Organ—with bells! The original carousel house cupola has recently been restored.

Recreation Park itself is large, with copse of mature trees and small ground undulations here and there, perfect for small boys to roll down. It is also Rod Serling’s neighborhood park, in which he played most nights as a boy, weather permitting, and where he rode the then-new carousel for free—providing he brought a piece of litter.

Rodman Serling (b. 1924) was raised just a short walk away from this park at 67 Bennett Street. His father was a wholesale butcher, which means he did not stand behind a counter in a bloody apron chopping single steaks for local matrons. Rather, he sold large quantities of meat to schools, hospitals, and other such local institutions. Consequently, he did very well financially, thank you, even during the Great Depression of the Thirties. Perhaps this was one reason Rod Serling remembered his childhood as one of “warmth, comfort and well-being.”

Certainly the old Serling home still looks warm and comfortable. It sits on a quiet, middle-class, tree-lined residential street. In May the trees were just in blossom and their brilliant blooms made me think of the suburban neighborhood from the “Twilight Zone” episode, “The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street,” which Serling wrote for the first season of his TV series. The house is white, wood-frame, two-storied with a front cupola for a room in the attic. There is an enclosed entry way topped by a widow’s walk. The house is two spacious rooms wide and seems to be three rooms deep, for a total of at least 12 rooms, not counting the attic rooms and the basement. There is a one-story garage which seems to have been recently tacked onto the side of the house. The front yard has several trees in bloom and handrail-lined steps lead up to a small front porch containing stacked white chairs. Unfortunately, no one answered the doorbell, which I was gauche enough to ring, so I have no idea what the interior of the house looks like.

While I was taking pictures of the house and street, the next door neighbor came out to investigate. When I told her why I was there, she said I was part of the tradition. When her family first moved onto the street, they had no idea they were living next door to Serling’s boyhood home. They wondered why there was a fairly regular stream of cars gliding slowly past the house, with cameras clicking. Sometimes people would get out and walk around, taking pictures. That’s how they discovered they’d moved into the Twilight Zone.

But, it doesn’t bother her or her family. They enjoy the brush with fame. Her teenage daughter had never heard of the Rod Serling or the “Twilight Zone” when they moved in, but has since done extensive research on the man and the show and has written a paper on both for one of her high school classes.

I asked about the family that lived there now. They seem pleasant enough, she said, but she doesn’t really know them. They keep to themselves. It sounded like modern suburbia. Perhaps it was different in Serling’s day.

Back at the park we spent some time at the carousel and the bandshell. The latter resembles a large Greek gazebo, with Doric columns supporting a domed roof. Think of a smaller version of the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C. In the middle of the gazebo’s floor, in place of a statue of Thomas Jefferson, is a circular bronze plate flush with the concrete in which it is embedded. Carved onto the plate is: “Rod Serling, Creator of The Twilight Zone, Walking Distance.”

The latter is a reference to the 1959 first season “Twilight Zone” episode of the same name, which starred Gig Young and which was inspired by this park, this carousel, and this gazebo. In the story (this is all from decades-old memory, so I may have the details wrong), Gig Young is a typically-frazzled businessman on a commuter train which breaks down in a rural area. He is told it will take some hours to make repairs. He asks the conductor where they are and is told that they are only a mile or so from his own hometown! It is certainly within “walking distance,” so he decides to walk down the road a piecice.