

PARSEC Meeting Schedule

October 2004

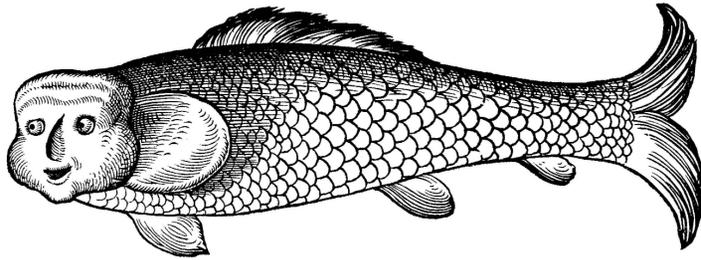
Date: October 9th 2004 - 2 PM
Topic: Henry Tjernlund - "Asteroids, Comets and Meteorites, Oh My!" and first nominations for 2005 officers
Location: East Liberty Branch of Carnegie Library

November 2004

Date: November 13th 2004 - 2 PM
Topic: Book Sale and final nominations for 2005 officers
Location: East Liberty Branch of Carnegie Library

December 2004

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



PARSEC

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

Meetings - Second Saturday of every month.

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

Sigma is edited by David Brody
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SIGMA

The Newsletter of PARSEC • October 2004 • Issue 223

In This Issue:

Ann Cecil on Noreascon





View From the Top

The President's Column - Kevin Geiselman

The Future Begins Tomorrow

In 1947, nuclear physicist "Doc" Cargraves and a trio of high school kids built the rocket Galileo and went to the moon, ushering in a new age of privately funded space travel.

Well, not really. *Rocket Ship Galileo*, Robert Heinlein's novel about a Nazi base on the Moon, presented an impatience with the speed at which the gov-

ernment was getting humanity into space and, with typical American aplomb, bypassed it with private enterprise. Wait a minute? 1947? The Second World War was barely over and already we were impatient to get into space? Those were the days when anything was possible and the future was right around the corner. Humanity was to become a spacefaring race.

In June of 2004, Bob Rutan's Spaceship One became the first privately funded passenger craft to fly into space, 100 kilometers altitude. By the time you read this we will know whether he and his team have won the coveted X-Prize by flying into space twice in a two week period, ushering in a new age of private space travel.

Well, not really. History has shown us that, since the end of the great US-Soviet Space Race, revolutions don't happen any more. They are too risky in both money and lives. These things take many years to happen and then, once the prize is claimed, it takes many more years for those innovations to find their way into something more practical.

Space travel is evolutionary, not revolutionary. The space shuttle began design in the 50's and 60's, was built in the 70's, flew in the 80's and now in the 21st Century is past its life span and should be replaced. Are we to wait another 30 years for the next generation of spacecraft? Even with pioneers like Bob Rutan, it will likely take many decades for spaceflight to become available to anyone but government astronauts and the very rich looking for a thrill.

We need some sort of motivation, a new space race to bring out the risk takers. With the Soviet Union gone, I see only two things that will actually get us back out into space where we belong: Alien invasion or imminent planetary destruction. Since the probability of an interplanetary invasion fleet descending upon the Earth is probably quite low, that leaves only the end of the world.

That threat comes from impactors such as comets and asteroids. The news has told us of some close calls recently and ancient history (such as the extinction of the dinosaurs 65 million years ago) tells us that it can and probably will happen again but the key word in this is "imminent". The firm probability that the Earth will be hit by something big in the next few thousand years isn't enough. People want a number before they act.

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Losses & Gains

PARSEC lost two long-time members this month: Sondra Melick and Irene Tjernlund.

Sandi Melick, wife of Bob and mother of three sons whose names all start with K, died on September 10, 2004, after a long illness that put her in a nursing home. Many of us remember Sandi, a vibrant and charming lady, who came to PARSEC meetings and Confluence as long as she was able. First it was on crutches, then in a wheelchair, and over the last couple years, only in spirit. She attended several of Barb Carlson's Halloween parties dressed in the red wig and sporting fangs, in homage to her favorite character from the Karen Taylor vampire books. We will continue to miss her charm and her engaging sense of humor.

Irene Tjernlund, who was still attending PARSEC meetings and even a few after-meetings at the Sharp Edge up until this summer, died on September 23, 2004 in the hospital. She was still enthusiastic about science-fiction and PARSEC, even after a stroke in December 1994 (which caused her to miss the Christmas party that year) kept her from being able to participate as fully as she would have liked. She used to always bake something (cake, cookies) for the meetings, but that stopped, and current members mostly remember her as the lady on oxygen who was hard to hear. She had a massive collection of science-fiction and was always eager to hear more about what was happening, even at 81. She will be missed by her son Henry and by all those who knew her.

And on a happier note, we have a gain: Mary Soon Lee gave birth to a daughter!

More Stuff

From Diane Turnshek - Sasha, Gen and I are contributing items for a craft show on Saturday, the 6th of November (at West Hempfield Elementary School in Irwin, PA). Last year, Tracey, Nancy and Joan contributed items (but, unfortunately, we had a huge snow storm the day of the craft show). John Mizik frequently sells his fantasy clay creations there. If anyone wants to come and sit at the table with me or bring items, please let me know. Eight foot tables are \$15.00. "No baked goods, Tupperware, Home Interiors, Avon, Mary Kay, etc." Contact me at (724) 863-1345 ordiane@sff.net.

get there. The Hugos were mainly exciting because Phil got to be a star; this year I didn't have any particular favorites I was rooting for. I missed the Masquerade, or at least only saw part of it - we were in the Mended Drum, quaffing a few beers, and they had a BIG TV set up to show it. Many many folk were in front of us. Susan Diguardiola (sp. approx.) was hostess, and she did an excellent job. They had a paid entertainer following the Masquerade, which started incredibly late; the paid entertainer was not as much fun or interesting as the costumers, so we left.

And next year - Scotland!

My only responsibility this year was the William Tenn exhibit. Twice a day, I tramped through and made sure none of the photos and memorabilia had fallen down (after the second day they pretty much all knew their places). Phil was pretty much lionized throughout the con; I couldn't get in to any of his first couple of panels – they'd passed standing room only and were into serious hall overflow. And they didn't put them in little rooms either, since he was co-GOH with Pratchett. Phil looked very grand in his tux, giving out the Big Hugo (the novel). I didn't see the retros, though I hear he looked equally elegant there. And his remarks were witty and well-placed (as usual); I heard people in the halls talking about how much they enjoyed hearing him, how surprised they were at how sharp he is, and how many truly funny anecdotes he knows.

Diane Turnshek is now Eastern Regional Director for SFWA, which means she was running the SFWA Suite. Last year she did her part for me (I made all the Parsecians at Torcon come and do two hours volunteering in the Green Room, which I was running), so I did two hours as volunteer hostess in the SFWA Suite. It was fun, and not a lot of work. And Jane Jewell, obviously under the impression that I was SOMEBODY, took my picture.

This year I got to go to programming, which was very interesting. I didn't hear any panels as inspiring as last year's China Mieville and Kim Stanley Robinson talk about differences in workstyles, but I did enjoy several panels. One of the funniest moments: a nice young male author, after listening to Wen Spencer describe her effort in *Tinker* to explore the fear that every girl feels in dating, said "But no girl in my High School ever felt afraid." And every woman in the audience roared with laughter.

Another panel that may yet change my life: James Patrick Kelly anchored a 'Save Clarion East' panel, because it turns out that Michigan State University, which has basically bankrolled Clarion East all these years, is now kicking them out. Kelly is on the Clarion East BOD, and is leading an effort to find them both a new home and a better, sounder method of operating. Clarion West, which is very successful, is partially funded and supported by the local fan community in Seattle; it would be logical for Clarion East to follow that model. As of half-an-hour later, Deirdre Moen and Diane Turnshek and I have set up a "Bring Clarion Back to PA (where it belongs)" group, and are working on contacting those interested to try and convince Seton Hill and Clarion East that this is a natural and potentially profitable fit.

I never made it to the Art Show. I'm sure it was great, especially since our own Chris Hutson had stuff in it, but it was on an upper floor, and somehow, by the time I found it, it was closed. On my way back from the closed Art Show (this was on Sunday) I started running into people; I finally got to talk with Cormac Russell, who was as unmistakable as promised. I also saw David Brody, and Max. There were other PARSEC members there that I just didn't run into (mostly Randy, whom I saw at his concert on the first day and then never saw again).

I'm sure I left out a lot: I know there was video and gaming, but I didn't

Reviews

Books

Hannibal's Children

by John Maddox Roberts

by Matt Urick

John Maddox Roberts has been writing a mystery series set in ancient Rome. It must have seemed natural to use his familiarity with this setting in a science fiction novel.

Subtitled "A Novel of Alternate History"



Roberts sets *Hannibal's Children* in a world where Carthage did not fall to Rome. Hannibal is able to force a decisive confrontation with Rome aided by reinforcements from Philip V of Macedon, aid he never received in our universe. The Romans are given a choice of exile from Italy or the destruction of Rome. The Romans choose exile - for while Rome exists there is hope.

Over a century later the Romans have carved out an empire in Northern Europe ruled from New Rome. But it is still not the Rome of their ancestors, the home of their gods. A decision is made to send an expedition south to gather intelligence for the reclamation of Rome.

Nearly the first third of this novel is setting up the background for the rest. Only after the expedition reaches the court of the Shofet of Carthage do the wheels within wheels start turning. Carthage is vying with Egypt to be the most powerful and both are wary of the Seleucids in the East. The Romans seem a heaven sent army to be used by Carthage to realize its dreams and then discard.

Politics is something the well-bred patrician Roman has had to practice since youth. Marcus Cornelius Scipio believes he can use the present situation to his advantage to restore Rome to its glory and more. If only he can keep in check the ambitions of his second in command, Titus Lucerius Norbanus, while he plays one mighty leader against another.

Some readers might find the lack of deep characterization a detriment. The book also suffers from the usual problems of alternate history – many areas of culture stay lockstep with ours while some, the engineering of Archimedes in this case, vary widely. Overall the novel is entertaining enough if the reader is willing to stay at it long enough.

At the end the main characters are starting to regroup their positions indicating several more novels may be planned. They'll have to go on most likely without me as a reader.

John Grimes: Reserve Commodore

by A. Bertram Chandler

reviewed by Matt Urick

The fourth volume in the Science Fiction Book Club reprinting of the John Grimes adventures at least answers one question. With the inclusion of various shorter stories in this volume, it will take six not five volumes to include every-

thing. It also provides a start answering whether the earlier novels contain some exciting spark that seems to be missing from much of the later novels. The very last novels have been mere devices for Chandler to revisit favorite characters from earlier novels and set the scene for a smooth transition to the earlier novels that take place after the later novels.

The first novel, *The Last Amazon*, takes Grimes back to Sparta, the setting of *Spartan Planet*, one of the few of early novels collected so far. This was the world with no women that now is adjusting to a new culture. Grimes is sent to investigate undercurrents of subversiveness. It isn't very difficult for the reader to guess that the new wife of the Archon wants to turn this into a world ruled by Amazons. Only her underestimating the abilities of Grimes and his few operatives prevents this from happening.

The next novel, *The Wild Ones*, was the last Grimes novel written. Grimes is sent to New Salem to investigate the exploitation of a possibly sentient species similar to Piper's "Little Fuzzy." The incident Grimes creates to allow the Space Survey to intervene typically gets out of hand as he and his agents are almost burnt at the stake as witches.

There is a definite break between these last novels and the "Rim World" novels as signaled by the future-traveling dream sequence in the last chapter. The story of how Grimes went from Reserve Commodore in the Space Survey to Admiral in the Rim World seems destined not to be revealed.

The five latest shorter stories are presented next. These adventures precede Rim World. I had read a couple when they were published in magazines but had forgotten them. They are the usual ribald romps.

The last short story "Chance Encounter" is one of the earliest Grimes story. It is the tale of an event that happens while Grimes captains a survey of unexplored Rim World territory.

Grimes is an admiral in the last novel, *Catch the Star Winds*. His adventuring days are done although he would not mind leading the maiden voyage of the new ship with the experimental drive instead of sending others. One of the crew makes an "improvement" to the new drive during the test flight. The crew finds they must overcome their jealousies and annoyances before they can make it home again.

The stories are all quick easy reads, entertaining at times but not different enough to be very memorable long after they are done.

Movies

New Worlds to Conjure: Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow

reviewed by William Blake Hall

With less than a month to go until the election, Kerry is finally generating some excitement — not John Kerry, but Kerry Conran, writer-director of *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow*. *Sky Captain* is a tribute to that Jules Verne cosmos in which lone geniuses in garage laboratories cobble together technological miracles to instantaneous gargantuan effect, and Conran's real story is

Noreascon IV Report

Worldcons are a special form of insanity; they last at least five days, with the equivalent of five convention's worth of programming, an art show, a dealer's room, video and anime, a con suite, etc., etc. If you go a day early and help set-up, you have the benefit of already knowing your way around before the convention starts, but then it lasts six days, and starts to be grow from a con into a lifestyle.

Every Worldcon has its truly marvelous features and its not so great features. Noreascon 4 (Boston is very proud of having held the worldcon more than once and wants everyone to KNOW it) was no exception. Probably the highlight of the con was the Concourse. This was a very large room (easily as large as the Dealer's area), which was broken up into exhibits, fanactivity areas, and a food place named, in Terry Pratchett's honor, "The Mended Drum". [in the Discworld books, this is a popular tavern]. The Mended Drum on the Concourse provided a good place to buy food and drink; the food was well above the usual convention hall standard, and the prices were not outrageous. The drink included alcohol, and in the evenings, Pete Grubbs (yes, OUR Pete) provided lively and appropriate entertainment to enjoy along with the booze. You could go out into the attached shopping mall to eat, if you wanted to Get Away, but many fen simply grabbed a bite at The Mended Drum and then went back to con activities.

Yes there was an official Con Suite; it was a pleasant place dominated by the KoffeeKlatsch tables, which were tables and chairs in a roped-off portion of the Con Suite. The food there was strictly munchies, veggies and cheese, crackers and candy, which is pretty much par for Con Suites anymore. Ah, but Boston is the home of many fine restaurants (especially Legal Seafood), and no one had trouble finding good food and drink, since we were in the heart of downtown.

The dealer's room was large, much as you'd expect at a Worldcon. It wasn't the largest I've ever seen, but it was sufficiently mind-boggling. I saw some really neat leather masks, which alas turned out to be very expensive. I planned not to buy anything at Worldcon, and held out for several days, even though I had to walk through the Dealer's room to get from the main hall where programming was held back to the Sheraton where I was staying. (the Boston Sheraton is a long and ugly story I will omit from this account). Then I found a hard copy of Pratchett's *Guards, Guards* which has long been out of print, and they wouldn't let me use plastic unless I bought over \$30 worth, and they had a rare edition of John Clute's essays priced very reasonably, and... You get the idea. Fortunately I stopped myself before I got too far; fortunately for Max, who bought herself a new computer at the end of con sale, and then fast-talked me into bringing it back to Pittsburgh for her (I only had me and Greg and our stuff in the Beetle).

Bigfoot was looking back in. They found a footprint with three toes — common to PA (the Washington state Bigfeet have 5 toes).

His final encounter was in fall of 92, in the Canonsburg area. The group was investigating a theft report: somebody stole all their grapes. The people had serious grape vines, but they had been cleared of grapes. They staked out the area, saw some green eyes, but nothing much. In the morning they saw that a nearby apple tree had been stripped of all apples. Two of the boys that lived there were sf fans, planning to create a movie like *Night of the Living Dead*, so PASU was suspicious. They staked out the place the next night, and Devon was down on an old railroad track; there were other members up atop the ridge, and a third group watching in an orchard in the middle. Devon's group got hit by catapulted rocks, which narrowly missed hitting them. After moving around, he and one boy saw a creature, but no one else was looking.

He talked about the smell, which has given the Bigfoot the local nickname of "Skunk Ape". He noted that it is not a skunk smell, more boiled cabbage, rotted meat, combined with a sweetness like an old potpourri.

He talked about being an eyewitness, trying to get a description and drawing done as soon as possible. As soon as any sighting was found, that was it; nothing more every happened in that area.

Theory #1 : Undiscovered primate.

Theory #2: Alien pet being let out.

Theory #3: Some future visitor.

Theory #4: Supernatural form.

Theory #5: Hoax, total fabrication.

His pro (reasons for believing: 1) reliable, believable people report seeing the creature 2) today's crypto-zoology turns into tomorrow's real zoology.

His cons: 1) lack of evidence - why no pictures? Why no bones? 2) a lot of hoaxes have been exposed in the last 5 or 6 years.

PASU was a mix; not just scientists, but hunters, people who are curious, policemen, etc. It shut down because the guy running it (Stan Gordon) 1) got married and 2) had some legal hassles and 3) he is promoting the Kecksberg incident. Ross is convinced that Kecksberg was a crashed spy satellite.

There was a lively question and answer session, which veered off into some very funny lines which we can't print in SIGMA.

Stuff

From Greg Armstrong: The Robotics Institute is celebrating its 25th anniversary with various events scheduled for October 11 to 14. Some demos and talks are free. Almost all is open to the public. See www.ri25.org for details.

Geiss - continued from page 2

Unfortunately, the number will come weeks or days before doomsday. Too late.

Maybe if there really were Nazis on the moon.

much like that, taking years just to piece together six minutes of film on his own, then getting a hundred million dollars to lead the whole project. Conran may be a flash in the pan, but it's a monumental flash, a composite valentine to pretty much everything he's ever loved about movies. In the past few reviews I've had to give begrudging praise to noble borderline misfires, but *Sky Captain*, like *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Blade Runner*, *Dark City* and *The Matrix* before it, pretty well holds together in its worldbuilding.

Let's sweep some nits aside first. The much-noted look of the film, while cool, was often quite murky, and I found this surprisingly true of the sound quality as well; hopefully, you'll get to see and hear a brighter, clearer print. The gauzy glows suggested movies at the dawn of the sound era, yet I was reminded most of all not of actual movies but of movie poster art from that time. I suspect that because the whole thing was acted out on a big blue stage, the actors missed out on that subtle underpinning of actual peril, and as I listened to them they seemed almost to be sleepwalking through the most appalling hazards. *King Kong* had Kong, and Willis O'Brien behind him, but it also had the recently departed Fay Wray, one of the great gratuitous screamers of all time. Here, however, the leads have much less to actually do. Jude Law, prophetically christened for the patron saint of the impossible, dutifully looks and acts the part of Sky Captain Joe Sullivan. When giant robots come flying from nowhere to stomp through New York City round about 1939, the call goes out from a radio tower reminiscent of the beginning of many an RKO Radio Picture, not to the Air Force, but simply to "Sky Captain." As surely as if summoned by Gotham City's Bat Signal, Law coolly saves the day. He gets saddled, though, with Gwyneth Paltrow as newspaperwoman Polly Perkins. Paltrow has her strengths — her silent portraits of reproachfulness are wonderful — but her character is made really more lucky than clever, and the running joke about her love of her camera runs very thin very fast, until you wish someone would step on it and crush it just to put her, it, and us out of our collective misery. Unlike more sassy feisty spitfires she could have been drawn from, like the Wilma Deering of the original Buck Rogers, Polly mainly gets to tag along and bicker. I heard that someone was thinking of Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy, but heck, I would have settled for Harrison Ford and Carrie Fisher.

One act of invention I especially appreciated was Conran strongly suggesting Nazism while neatly sidestepping it. Not to take one iota away from the horror of the Third Reich, but it is high time that movies bothered to recognize the many other mutations of Evil, and there is not one swastika to be found here. A zeppelin called the Hindenburg III docks at the Empire State Building, and even Berlin has its factories and generators stolen by these mysterious robots. The villain is named Totenkopf, and appropriately enough his handiwork bears the mark of a winged skull, but he is working on his own somewhere in the vicinity of Shangri-La — yes, *that* Shangri-La, no doubt recently visited by Ronald Colman. Yet Totenkopf looks like Laurence Olivier, itself an interesting dilem-

ma, since he played both a lieutenant of Dr. Josef Mengele in *Marathon Man* and a hunter of Mengele in an operatic piece of anti-cloning horror called *The Boys From Brazil*. The mysterious Totenkopf threat is right out of Verne, a brilliant lone madman building an empire from nothing — or, is he???

This is akin to *Raiders* in its gleeful spirit of “Can you top this?” The movie keeps getting wilder and wilder. By the time we meet weird monstrous creatures, they seem to have nothing to do with Totenkopf’s ultimate scheme — but who cares, so long as they’re really neat? Totenkopf’s plan dwarfs even the megalomania of the James Bond supervillain Hugo Drax in *Moonraker*; had this movie galloped along a quarter hour longer we would probably have gotten invaded by Martians. Also, aside from two somewhat risqué moments, both involving a large hairy contributor named Omid Djalili, it manages to stay quite clean.

What is also remarkable is that Angelina Jolie is finally involved in a good movie. It’s been a while since *Girl, Interrupted*, which she basically stole from Wynona Ryder (which may explain Ryder’s behavior ever since as a form of compensation) or *The Bone Collector* (stupid as a mystery, but still cool as a movie). What is this spell she holds over some of us, obliging us to sit through two *Tomb Raider* disappointments and *Taking Lives*? *Sky Captain* marks her second collaboration with Giovanni Ribisi after *Gone in 60 Seconds*, here in the gum-chewing role of Dex Dearborn, ultimate engineer, and her role as a sort of fetishistically leatherclad Honor Harrington is small but satisfying.

I can easily see this movie again, and I don’t say that often. My only quibble is that it doesn’t really have that optimistic an outlook. It turns out that “World of Tomorrow” refers to Totenkopf’s inhuman vision, and as such reminds me of the slogan of the *X-Files* movie, “Fight the future.” A movie that offers a hopeful 21st Century — now, that would be an achievement.



Editor’s Note:

Two or three of you may have missed my monthly rant in the last couple of issues. I assure both of you that it’s absence has been the result of space limitations, not shyness. I’ll be back in the next issue with more suitable incendiary comments. Prepare to be offended.

September Minutes



PARSEC met on Saturday September 11, 2004 at the East Liberty branch of the Carnegie Library. The pre-meeting assembly was enlivened by Worldcon discussions; rough count was that 18 PARSEC members attended, plus a number of PARSEC friends (like past member Cormac Russell, who did indeed have fluorescent yellow braids and a short but very friendly girlfriend). Pittsburghers made such a good impression in

Boston that two New Yorkers actually decided to join us: welcome Mike and Elektra Hammond!

Laurie Mann brought her computer with a collection of worldcon photos, which she let play as background while we all shared experiences and driving times.

A slight distraction was the nearby church service, which seems to have increased its numbers, and sang hymns (off-key) with a great deal of enthusiasm while we met.

The raffle was won by Kevin Hayes (again!) but he let Ryan do the choosing.

Laurie Mann gave a quick summary of Worldcon statistics. Geis talked about the release of the dvd for *Return of the King*, which is going to be 4 hours and 11 minutes long (50 minutes of extra footage).

Greg gave a treasurer’s report, summarizing the last two months; \$58.04 to the good.

Ann Cecil talked about the 501c3 schedule: presentation to the membership in October, with a vote in November. All paid members will be sent a copy of the new by-laws before then, by mail.

The main presentation was given by Devon Ross on Bigfoot. He talked about PASU, the PA Association for Study of the Unexplained (sort of a PA X-files group).

Originally from Kansas, as a teenager he experienced first-hand a UFO sighting, which he described.

Professionally, Devon is a nuclear engineer, so when he moved to PA, he felt that he might be able to help PASU. PA has a lot of UFOs, ghosts, bigfeet: “either a lot of imaginative people or a very weird place.”

In 1990, reports of an orange glowing object drew him to a ridge in California PA; he and two others (one a police officer) ran into something with large green glowing eyes, which moved very fast. The next morning they found large triangles in a field; the end result was that the police officer quit the group: “too strange for me!”

Next time was Laurel Highlands, a trailer built into the side of the hill, where the person in the trailer looked out of a window about 8-9 ft off the ground, and