

PARSEC Meeting Schedule

September 2004

Date: September 11th 2004 - 2 PM
Topic: Devin Ross on Bigfoot
Location: East Liberty Branch of Carnegie Library

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
Send article submissions to: sigma@spellcaster.org



SIGMA

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The View of the Darkness

The President's Column - Kevin Geiselman

When I was a kid, I was afraid of the dark. Not of the darkness itself, mind you, but of the things that could be hiding in the dark. I was particularly fearful of the formless, nameless denizens of the space beneath the basement stairs, ready to reach between the steps and grasp my skinny legs as I ran up.

As I grew older, I countered this fear with knowledge. I read about ghosts, UFOs, Bigfoot, the Loch Ness Monster, all the pseudoscience and cryptozoology I could find. As I matured, I tempered it with harder sciences and more critical thinking. If there were alien saucers visiting from another world, why would the occupants look like little greys when they evolved on another world? If Bigfoot really was stalking the woods, why hadn't one ever gotten hit by a car crossing the highway? If people really can predict the future, why do we only ever hear about their predictions after the fact? Shouldn't they be making millions in commodities futures?

When I was in college and was having a rough time of it, I decided to do some reading to combat the nightmares I had been having. Something productive when I was feeling less than successful. Reading "The Lovecraft Omnibus" and returning to my "normal" sleep and dream patterns was pretty much proof of my no longer being afraid of the dark.

But, the world is not so well ordered that I can't be creeped out from time to time. Earlier this year I was riding my bicycle from McKeesport to Washington DC. Most of the first hundred miles was done at night because I had learned that riding my bicycle at night was cooler, quiet and generally a pleasant way to travel. I had gotten used to the glowing lights of my headlamp reflected in the eyes on various nocturnal creatures. Raccoons and possums quickly disappearing into the underbrush. Domestic cats brazenly staring and holding their ground. But at one point I came across something I had never seen before. A pair of eyes up off the ground. "Person height." It wasn't some animal, it was a someone or something! Then, the eyes did an odd dance, moving down close to the ground and bobbing up again. The chill ran around the small of my back before climbing up my spine and down each on my arms.

It was a deer.

But for a moment, I was that frightened little boy who raced up the basement stairs. That moment reminded me that for all our knowledge, there are still places we haven been and things we haven't seen. There are still mysteries lurking in the dark that we won't understand until we have a chance to shine a light on them.

You won't want to miss this month's meeting when a friend of mine Devin Ross sheds some light on Bigfoot and Bigfoot research in Western Pennsylvania.

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George Shannon, *Wishing Bridge* by Ann Cecil, *Grounded* by Michail Velichansky, *The Creature Struts Among Us* by John A. Frochio, *Errors* by Lawrence C. Connolly, *Reading the Cards* by Genevra Littlejohn, *The Last K* by Timons Esaias, *Passing On* by Laurie D. T. Mann, *Merchandising Rights* by Christina Schulman, *What Debt is Due?* by Anders Brink, *Troll* by Judith A. Friedl, *Do I Not Bleed?* by Dr. Eric Leif Davin, *Chump Change* by Pete Butler, *Battlefield* by Brendan Hykes, *Two for One* by L. K. Farrar, *Aldo of Lepton* by Dan Bloch, *Shellshock* by Thomas Rafalski, *The Golden Harp's Lament* by Kassandra Siegel, *Young Robots in Love* by Wen Spencer, *Shadow Chasing* by John Branch and *The Changelings* by Rachel Ross

\$12.00 (plus Shipping & Handling)

Parallax Second Tales

edited by Ann Cecil

A 60-page anthology of speculative fiction by PARSEC members.

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Fairy tales, folklore and myth set in motion in modern day Pittsburgh.

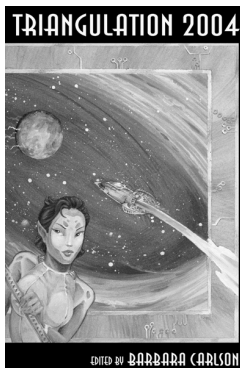
Contents: *Cool Beans* by Fruma Klass, *The Pittsburgh Town Musicians* by Ann Cecil, *The Love-Talker* by Judith A. Friedl, *Rumpled Bedfellows* by Kevin Hayes, *Childhood Traditions* by Nancy Hagan-Liddle, *Extreme Geas* by Diane Turnshek

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Shipping & handling \$3 for first item plus \$1 for each item after that:			
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Triangulation 2004:

A Confluence of Speculative Fiction

edited by Barbara Carlson

A 147-page anthology of speculative fiction
by PARSEC members.

Contents: *The Space Race* by J.F. Benedetto, *Another Man's Meat* by Wen Spencer, *Well Met by Moonlight* by Judith A. Friedl, *Infrared/Aware* by Susan Urbanek Linville, *The Down Elevator* by Dorothy Stone, *A Question of Belief* by John H. Branch, *Hard Port, Easy Money* by Anders Brink, *Merlin and Vivian—Monologues in the Whitethorn Bower: Then and Now* by Lynn Hawker, *The Gray War* by Larry Ivkovich, *Hard Port* by Henry Tjernlund, *Alpha and Omega* by G.N. Shannon, *Chasers* by Scott W. Baker, *(Can't Get No) Satisfaction* by Kevin Hayes, *From the Ashes* by Margaret McGaffey Fisk. Also includes introduction by Barbara Carlson, author biographies and a bio on the editor. Cover art by Diana Stein, interior art by Kevin Hayes, Henry Tjernlund and Barbara Carlson. \$12.00 (plus Shipping & Handling)
ISBN: 0-9743231-1-X

Excerpt from the Introduction:

"... In this issue we have another story from Wen Spencer, a long-time Parsec member. This story gives you a possible futuristic view of what it means to be civilized. I found it thought-provoking and disturbing. It's in Wen's usual easy-to-read style that sucks you right into the character's mind.

Speaking of minds, "The Down Elevator" is a disturbing trip into the dark recesses of a mouse-infested mind. This story pushes the envelope just a tad and deals with a couple uncomfortable issues.

We have a footrace on the moon, tiny ships racing to refuel big ships, a big ship that ran out of fuel, and war maneuvers on an alien planet. We have very hard liquor, how to win at roulette, a modern-day Cassandra, and a latter-day Walter Mitty. We have an alien invasion, discovery of a new life form and a piece about a possible future on the War on Drugs. And don't forget tasting sand. We have that, too. ..."

Triangulation 2003:

A Confluence of Speculative Fiction

edited by Diane Turnshek

A 144-page anthology of speculative fiction by PARSEC members.

Contents: *Dad on the Moon* by Rebecca Carmi, *Dangermoon* by Kevin Hayes, *Dead Men Do Tell Tales* by Alan Irvine, *Trusting Midnight* by



Grownup Fairy Tales For the 21st Century: The Village, The Manchurian Candidate

reviewed by William Blake Hall

My experience of *The Village* was darkened on two sides. I was stuck with one of the worst audiences I've had to sit with in years, complete with a little boy faking loud flatulent noises and two guys guffawing over Adrien Brody's character seeming retarded. The hell with "Save the tender virginal teenage brains" ratings; what we really need are ratings that say "Being bored AND stupid aren't good enough; if you can't tell the difference between a Shyamalan movie and *Anchorman* or *White Chicks* going in, PLEASE STAY OUT." Ahh, but that would be sensible, so no. What was worse, however, was Shyamalan shirking his own duties; I kept seeing microphones peeping into the tops of important scenes, a simple and skippable indie mistake I've not noticed since *Ethan Frome* was made a few years back with Joan Allen as Zena.

Coarseness is lurching back into vogue; my parents felt generally offended by Johnny Carson, so that leaves me helpless to even begin to describe this Jay Leno fellow to them. We need a good grownup fairy tale more than ever before — but is *The Village* really it? Once we could count on M. Night Shyamalan to take us to "the other side", a world overlapping that of Mulder and Scully, but this time around he tries a softer take on *The Truman Show*, preferring to deal more simply and directly with the power of belief and of playing large mind games. I appreciated it, and yet I could see how even a politely silent viewer could easily tune out.

One of my all-time favorite grownup fairy tales is the original *Manchurian Candidate*, now coming out on DVD just in time to coincide with the new remake. Those who know Angela Lansbury mainly as Jessica Fletcher or Mrs. Potts need to see what a hateful villain she could be — it's magnificent work. Once several years ago a movielovers' club asked us to list our top ten villains, and I cited Lansbury's Mrs. Iselin. Nowadays villains are sort of fun — we are obliged to be amused on some level by Anthony Hopkins as Hannibal Lecter, or Kathy Bates as Annie Wilkes, or Alan Rickman as Hans Gruber in the first *Die Hard* movie. Not so with Mrs. Iselin; I was properly chilled by how twisted and strident she really was, and found myself praying for her death.

This time around the Mrs. Iselin role is covered by Meryl Streep — and yet I get the feeling that someone originally wanted Glenn Close, then saw a chance to trade up. Even since *Fatal Attraction* Close has been the Queen of Wiggling Out, as those Dalmatian movies and this recent *Stepford Wives* movie prove, and Streep tries to come close to Close only to sound a little too strong for this mate-

rial — and there's the problem. Where the first movie crackled with eloquent wit, this new one lays the ominous music on thick. It's a bad trade. For that matter, the first one had an ingenious cover-all-bases plot, in which superpatriots find themselves in cahoots with Communist spies worthy of James Bond, led by the same actor who would play Red Chinese baddie Wo Fat on some episodes of *Hawaii Five-O*. This new effort, however, seems to strive for relevance without really having anything all that new or clever to say about these already movie-absurd times of ours. How terrifying is a candidate brainwashed by some corporate cabal named Manchurian Global, when for years we have already lived with, not a Manchurian Candidate, but a Halliburton Vice-President? Nowadays the plot smacks of too much effort to achieve too little, and too ludicrously at that — and that is where the art of the fairy tale is important, because the first movie rode a razor's edge between fairy tale (honestly, how else to explain Leslie Parrish's convenient choice of costume?) and crackerjack suspense thriller.

So I find myself honoring *The Village* and *The Manchurian Candidate* — while passing altogether on the new *Stepford Wives* — as noble if incomplete efforts to tell weird tales attempting to encapsulate our weird times. In the meantime, though, I will follow Frank Sinatra's unique journey, as compared to Denzel Washington playing yet again another Burned-Out Guy You Still Must Believe In, as he did in *Virtuosity* and *Ricochet*. We knew how to do this once, and I hope we can again someday.

Help, I'm Prepossessed!: Exorcist: The Beginning

reviewed by William Blake Hall

Their bodies of work are perhaps equally silly, and yet somehow they stand as two Scandinavian opposites in my mind. On the one hand there is Max Von Sydow, who somehow stubbornly retains the dignity of his returned Crusader Antonius Block playing chess with Death in Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*, and represented a true casting coup for director William Friedkin when he assumed the titular mantle of *The Exorcist*. On the other hand there is Renny Harlin, who directed the highly irresponsible yet addictively entertaining *Long Kiss Goodnight*, who for the most part is a connoisseur of cheesiness. Despite all the ill-advised dreck that Von Sydow has gotten himself mixed up in over the decades, he still looms tall in pop cultural memory as Father Lankester Merrin, the priest who got to take on Satan himself by way of Linda Blair. That height is assured and unmoved, and so it is left to Harlin to scramble upwards strenuously to overcome his own addiction to cheese.

Harlin is mostly, and thus commendably, successful. The key challenge before *Exorcist: The Beginning* is to answer the question "Does this prequel do justice to the character of Merrin?", and it pretty much does. This time Merrin is played by Stellan Skarsgard, the mathematician from *Good Will Hunting*, and this earlier Merrin continually assures us that he is an archaeologist and no longer a priest, and so he wanders through exotic deserts with a nice hat and

inspires us to wonder if his nickname could be Indiana. Merrin has already been through a lot, having survived a Sadistic Supreme Test of Personal Morality at the hands of a Nazi (but how and why did Merrin ever get so close to the Nazis in the first place?), but now he's got to investigate an anachronistically ancient church found buried in central Africa. Somehow Izabella Scorupco, James Bond's beautiful Russian ally in *Goldeneye*, is mixed up in this as well, and before you know it you have a fairly classy conventional thriller: spooky lantern-lit wanderings, signs heaped upon portents heaped upon omens, sexual tension, a reunion with the devil figure from the original movie (whose name, Pazuzu, remains mercifully unvoiced this time), and even a pre-Watergate use of the word "cover-up" with regard to the Vatican. The script, co-written by novelist Caleb Carr, is honorably ambitious, for this time around Satan seems obsessed with stirring up war as an end in itself, an ever-growing disease of violence and hatred.

This makes some sense, because the original movie benefitted from topicality. For some perverse reason one of my best memories of the original is that of some kid gratuitously stomping up and down on a car in broad daylight as Father Karas (Jason Miller) meekly walks by. In its time, the original *Exorcist* captured the fear that society was flying apart from within. In these post-9-11 days, a warning against jihad and/or Crusade seems perfectly appropriate.

If only Harlin had stayed with that theme. He has enough problems letting his movie be a nice moody mystery, only to decide towards the end that it is in fact a Someone Else who is truly possessed after all. The wonderful thing about the original was that you got the feeling that exorcism was WORK, a kind of exhausting drudgery of the soul, but by shoving it all towards the very end Harlin gives his exorcist his stature but unfortunately not his exorcism — quick, kiss the sash, ask for forgiveness, shout the formula, and boom, that's pretty much all ya gotta do. Worse, Harlin feels constrained to recreate the sickliness and nastiness of Linda Blair as Regan — and what can I say, it's dreadfully dated and disappointing. At the crucial climax, you will cover your eyes and ears — not in terror, but in embarrassment. It doesn't help that the production allows for obvious CGI effects for details better handled more realistically in the original. With more courage of his convictions, Harlin might have really pulled this off.

As it stands, this prequel succeeds in being an earnest tribute to the coming of Von Sydow as Merrin, and since I am prejudiced — that is to say, prepossessed — to root for that portrayal, I give this movie a passing grade. Another one, using much of the same footage but directed by John Frankenheimer, will be forthcoming, and if nothing else the two movies may provide a unique lesson in the making of a film — in itself a fitting tribute to a movie which first taught us the sort of powerful popular impact that film can have.

Geiss - continued from page 2

As a former member of the Pennsylvania Association for the Study of the Unexplained, Devin will not only give us some of the theories and evidence available, but also give us some of the inside dirt on the organization itself.