PARSEC Meeting Schedule

September 2005
Date: September 10th 2005 - 2 PM
Topic: Jacqueline Druga-Marchetti, Editor in Chief of LBF
      Books on the perils and pleasures of small press publishing.
      Also: Meet the Confluence Con Com
Location: Carnegie Library, Squirrel Hill Branch

October 2005
Date: October 8th 2005 - 2 PM
Topic: TBA
      Also: First round of officer nominations
Location: Carnegie Library, Squirrel Hill Branch

November 2005
Date: November 12th 2005 - 2 PM
Topic: TBA
      Also: Final round of officer nominations
Location: Carnegie Library, Squirrel Hill Branch

Cover Photography by Laurie Mann

SIGMA
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Scotland the Brave!
WorldCon Report

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

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

Website: http://www.parsec-sff.net
Meetings - Second Saturday of every month.
Dues: $10 Full Member, $2 Associate Member

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Return of the Caveman

I picked up the most recent issue of *Fortean Times* because it had a number of articles on *The War of the Worlds*, but in reading through it I found something interesting and frightening in the letters section. There, the writer was equating left-handedness with homosexuality, communism, marital infidelity, Satan worship and "mankind's universal division into left-wing and right-wing politics - for which we have no other explanation whatsoever." (Author's emphasis)

"The origin of this situation is that we are a hybrid cross between the two early varieties of man, Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon. Neanderthal was left-handed, totally sexually promiscuous and ruled by women. Cro-Magnon was right-handed, governed by pair bonding, and ruled by men."

Where did he get his scientific foundation; *Clan of the Cave Bear*? I'm no archeologist, but all it takes is a simple search of the Internet to discover that his thesis is garbage. But that same search of the Internet reveals that an astonishingly large number of people believe this sort of crap and use it to forward their own agendas.

I recall reading that a Bush Administration official was shocked to learn that 50% of Americans have less than average intelligence. It may be a statistician's joke, but it is actually true. A lot of people aren't very smart and when you think about what it takes to critically assess complex scientific principles (or even some simple ones) you will find that most of the people of the world are not up to the task. I'd like to think that it is not because they are stupid, but merely ignorant. I work with people on a daily basis who simply don't know how their computers work or how to work their computers because they have not been properly trained.

In a broader scientific sense, I see a disturbing trend in this country towards an abandonment of science in favor of political and religious rhetoric. Scientists have a difficult time convincing people of the effects of global warming when people see that this summer might be hotter than last but remember the bitter winter of a few years back and cannot parse when the scientist talks about change over tens of thousands of years. Then, the politicians step in and, for the short term benefit of oil companies and their own careers declare that the evidence is inclusive and more study needs to be done. The average person cannot see the mountain of proof of evolution collected over the last century. He cannot fathom the subtle changes that might occur over thousands of generations and instead falls back on the simplistic explanation of religious leaders that evo-

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lution is still "just a theory" and that Intelligent Design should be taught in school alongside evolution as an alternative.

This isn't science. It's a scam. It's taking advantage of people's lack of knowledge to fill them with lies, doubts and fear. Scientists simply don't have the skills or tools necessary to convey their message. But, there are those who can; Politicians, religious evangicals and advertisers. These people are skilled at boiling things down to the lowest common denominator and delivering it in sound bites that people can grasp and remember. They don't go in for all this science talk. They have their own message.

And in so doing, they are breeding a new generation of ignorance. Try this progression of events on for size:

If the President was able to push his religious agenda forward and was able to ban abortions, who do you think would be the most affected? Certainly, the rich would still be able to obtain abortions through their private doctors (as they were able to do before Roe v. Wade) but it is the poor who would suffer. The free clinics would close and women would either suffer in back alley doctor's offices or with coat hangers or they would have more children. These children would crowd already over-crowded school systems where they would be denied a foundation of critical thinking by being fed the lie that Intelligent Design is science and that abstinence is the only way to prevent unwanted pregnancies and AIDS. Without those critical thinking skills, they become a generation of sheep, easily swayed by politicians, evangicals and advertisers. Do you remember the subliminal messages in the movie They Live? Don't think. Don't Question. Obey. Consume. Our supposed leaders won't have to obfuscate their commands. The "March of the Morons" will hear it straight out and fall for it.

Fight. Fight for teaching real science in schools. Fight against the lie that is Intelligent Design as science. Fight against policies that keep people ignorant. Fight for people to wake up and see what the world is really like. Reach for the red pill, Mr. Anderson.
money Umma is about to throw away.

And then there is the discovery that not only is Umma not a Christian, but around Carnuntum the local pagan majority regards Christians as about one step below communists.

And this is day one. She still hasn't had to deal with Umma's boyfriend, the army vet who runs a fullering business that uses stale urine, lots of stale urine; who thinks watching people get executed in the arena is good, clean fun and who happens to be about the best lover, kind, considerate and passionate, that Nicole has ever known.

She hasn't had to deal with the plague either. Or the toothache. Or the hordes of German barbarians who are about to sweep over the wall.

Somehow Nicole has to manage to survive in a very alien world where life is much harder and a woman's life in particular much less valued than she is used to.

In the process, she is learning a few skills that just might help her to cope back home...if she can ever convince the household gods to send back there, that is.

I've often enjoyed Turtledove's alternative history fiction, especially his "The Confederacy Won" series. I haven't read anything by Judith Tarr before, but this book certainly serves as a good recommendation. If Turtledove's knowledge of history and eye for the details are very much in evidence, I suspect it is Tarr's contribution that makes Nicole such a fully fledged character. The book may be a tad on the long side, but most of it is a wonderful read set a world that you might not want to visit, but is filled with folks you'll really wish you knew in real life.

Seven Seasons of Buffy
edited by Glenn Yeffeth
Finding Serenity
edited by Jane Espenson
reviewed by Ann Cecil

These two large trade paperback collections, both from the same publisher (Benbella, from Dallas, TX), are targeted primarily at the fan base built from the two TV shows (Buffy the Vampire Slayer, and Firefly) created by Joss Whedon. Primarily, I say, because they contain articles that range beyond that scope. There are 20 articles in Finding Serenity and 22 in the Seven Seasons of Buffy. Both books seem to be working from the same formula, and there is an overlap in authors: 5 authors contributed to both books, and the editor of one contributes an article to the other.

The formula is interesting: About a third of the pieces are straight fan articles, that could have come from any fanzine. They range from the standard How My Favorite Character Was The Best On The Show to Why I hated That Particular Episode. The professionalism of the author doesn't seem to affect the result: several of these are written by 'name' authors. Charlaine Harris, in the...
est on record, and it saw some dramatic changes in the winner's circle. Dave Langford's Ansible gone pro ended the long Locus streak (15 or 16 in a row); Ellen Datlow won both best editor and best website. Charles Stross won his first Hugo (for the novella "The Concrete Jungle") and a complete surprise, to her and much of the audience, Susanna Clarke's first novel, "Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell" won the big one.

Just a few words about the Scottish cask ales: something called Goldihops was wonderful for my tastes. The company who brought the ales ran out of two of their six ales; not just, I'm told, what they had at the con, but what they had made!

It was fun; I got to have a nice dinner with Laurie Mann and Diane Turnshek and Greg and Diane's friend Susan and Gen's boyfriend Dan Hall. Greg and I faithfully sampled all the Scottish specialities, including Haggis, which is much tastier than the descriptions, and stayed at a quaint place named the Babbity Bowster (really). I look forward to the next one - 10 years from now?

Buffy book, complains in "A Reflection on Ugliness" that all the characters look like Californians -- thin, tanned, cool Californians. [Bad news, Charlaine: Californians really do look like that.]

Another third strive for higher meaning (not as in literature, but as in psychology). These look at concepts within the shows -- "The Power of Becoming" by Jacqueline Lichtenberg, for instance, and explain the deeper truths being revealed by what looked like just a successful piece of entertainment. Some of them are laughable; Lichtenberg's is interesting, if a bit too earnest.

And the last third? Those are the ones deconstructing the episodes, talking about why the shows work (or don't work), from a structural and creative aspect. In the Firefly book, Keith DeCandido has an essay entitled "The 'Train Job' Didn't Do the Job" that talks about the flaws in that episode, contrasted with other, better episodes. In Buffy, Scott Westerfield has a riveting and thoughtful essay entitled "A Slayer Comes to Town" that deconstructs most science-fiction as well as the series, and goes on to illustrate effectively what Joss Whedon did with dialogue and action to make his show work.

Oh yes: I should probably have said "30%" rather than a third, since there are a few odd leftovers, more so in the Firefly book, that are just fun, sometimes fiction: "Firefly vs The Tick" by Don DeBrandt is hysterically funny (well, maybe only funny if you've never seen The Tick). "Is That Your Final Answer?" by Roxanne Longstreet Conrad, in the Buffy book, is merely cute, but in an inoffensive way.

Altogether, the books manage to provide light reading, a few real insights, and some decent belly laughs. I thought them worth the (relatively low) price.
Worldcon Report
Ann Cecil

Worldcon was in Scotland this year, held in the convention center in the city of Glasgow. Glasgow is a city strongly reminiscent of Pittsburgh; it was always a blue-collar town, pretty much dominated by one major industry (ship building) which has now disappeared. So walking around Glasgow reminds one of Pittsburgh, first because everywhere you want to go seems to be uphill from where you are, and second because half the storefronts along the way are boarded up, deserted buildings, for rent or sale.

Like Pittsburgh, Glasgow tore down the rusting and abandoned workplaces. As Pittsburgh has done at the Waterfront, there are a few large leftovers to remind folks of what used to be: In Glasgow, there is a giant crane still standing where the Queen's docks and shipyards were. The interesting thing is that, rather than building a vast shopping place on the now filled in and covered over area, Glasgow built a new convention center. So Worldcon in 2005, as in 1995, was held on the spot where the Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth cruise liners were built.

Some of this background I learned from visiting a Tall Ship (the GlenLee) which is anchored at a pier right behind the convention center. The ship tour was fascinating, since the GlenLee had a very odd history: it went through 4 names, 5 countries, and got outfitted with steam engines over the course of its approximately 100 years. Along with the ship itself, there is a nice display of various ship artifacts, bits of historical info, and a very pleasant gift shop. In that shop, I picked up an odd book which explains the differences between Edinbuggers (denizens of Edinburgh, the capital city, about 40 miles away on the North Sea coast) and Weegies (denizens of Glasgow are properly called Glaswegians). The book is full of jokes, none subtle but many very funny, and almost all anti-Edinburgh, in a 'we can say this cause we are Scots too' fashion. For example: "Glasgow's kids are not better natural fighters than Edinburgh kids. It is just that they are better trained and have better weaponry." "How many Edinburgh graduates does it take to screw in a light bulb? One: he stands still and the world revolves around him."

Worldcon had a hard time producing entertainment as - uh - lowbrow as that. Worldcon, as seems to happen most often when in the United Kingdom, had lots of very erudite programme. Since the Dealer's room was dingy (evidently there aren't the Small Press and Stuff dealers in the UK and the continent that there are in the US), and there was no Con Suite (there was a great Fan Lounge and some excellent ale however), I mostly went to programme. I missed the opening ceremonies, since Greg wanted to see the Botanic Gardens. They were extensive, and fortunately mostly indoors (since it was raining in that enthusiastic fashion so frequent in the British Isles). Greg faithfully explained the differences to me, but they still all looked like plants.

So I started with a 5pm panel on “The Art of the Reviewer”, which fea-