

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

PARSEC

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

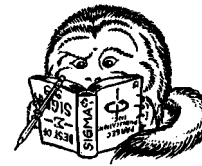
President - Kevin Geiselman	Vice President - Sarah Wade-Smith
Treasurer - Greg Armstrong	Secretary - Joan Fisher
Commentator - Ann Cecil	

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

Meetings - Second Saturday of every month.

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

Sigma is edited by David Brody
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SIGMA

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Scotland the Brave! *WorldCon Report*





View From the Top

The President's Column - Kevin Geiselman

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)

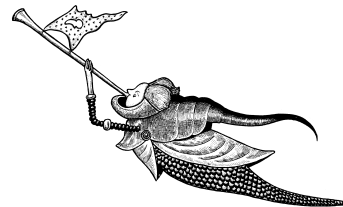
"The origin of this situation is that we are a hybrid cross between the two early varieties of man, Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon. Neanderthal was left-handed, totally sexually promiscuous and ruled by women. Cro-Magnon was right-handed, governed by pair bonding, and ruled by men."

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-

continued on page 10



Announcements

On Saturday, Sept. 10, from 8 p.m. until midnight, you are all cordially invited to an all-filk installment of the Threepenny Opry Performance Series at the Starlite Lounge,

364 Freeport Road, Blawnox, PA. (This is the first known occasion in which a commercial performance venue in the Pittsburgh area has hosted a dedicated filk event!) Pete Grubbs, Randy Hoffman, and Robert "Robin the Just" Stockton will play sets; other scheduled performers include Sue Gartland, Kevin Hayes, and Kira Heston. The Parallax Second Players will perform excerpts from a selection of Confluence musical travesties, and there will be some audience participation as well (also known as "singalongs").

The Threepenny Opry is sponsored by Calliope, The Pittsburgh Folk Music Society. There is no cover charge, but a donation is requested. Children are welcome if accompanied by a parent or guardian. Smoking is not permitted in the performance room, but people can smoke in the Starlite Lounge's bar. There may or may not be open filking afterward.



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 evangelicals 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, evangelicals 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.



Reviews

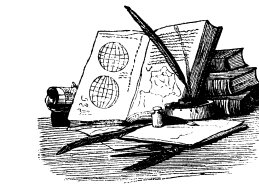
Books

Household Gods

by

Judith Tarr and Harry Turtledove

reviewed by: Sarah-Wade Smith



I am tempted to send this book to everyone I know who whinges about how rough there life is. Yes, I always knew life under primitive conditions was rough, but that was intellectual. This book kind of puts it into a guy feeling.

Consider our protagonist, Nicole Perrin, a struggling corporate lawyer and divorced mother of two in LA. She is having the day from Purgatory. Her child support checks are late again because her ex is vacationing in Cancun. She not only has to drive an hour out of her way to get the kids to day care, but her provider just notified her that she is going out of business, effective today. No, she really doesn't know where Nicole can take the kids tomorrow. She's late for work and finds out that she has just been passed over for the promotion she really was working so hard for in favor of a male attorney she honestly believes is not as good as her.

Just before she falls asleep, she looks at a portrait of the Roman gods of the household, Liber and Libera, and earnestly prays they get her out of this torment. Say, a nice trip to the wonderful hypocrisy free Roman empire. Somehow her earnest prayer tickles the long-unworshipped dieties' fancy and...remember that old proverb about being careful what you wish for?

So, Nicole awakes next morning in the body of her distant ancestor Umma in the colonia of Carnuntum on the Danube in the reign of Marcus Aurelius Augustus. Now she's having the day from hell!

To start with, there are the lavatory arrangements: a earthenware jug under her bed, already stuffed with last night's meal. And since most of the rest of the town uses the same system....well, it's not a nice place to have a nose.

Then there is breakfast, which turns out to be gritty whole grain bread moistened with olive oil and washed down with watered ...wine?! The daughter of an alcoholic, Nicole is death on anything with alcohol in it. Finding out that she now owns a bar, and that not only she, but her (or rather Umma's) eight and five year olds are expected to drink the wine is, well, horrifying. And her efforts to convince others that they should drink nice heathy water only make them worry that's she's crazy. And a prompt attack of Montezuma's revenge soon shows her why. Pass the diluted wine, please.

Then there is the schock of finding out that she doesn't just employ her housekeeper/bartender, Julia; she owns her. As in slavery. Suggesting that she might free Julia is enough to infuriate Umma's brother. That's a lot of his good

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 in 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. Charlaïne Harris, in the

August Minutes(Picnic Report)

Ann Cecil



PARSEC collected at South Park, at the Indiana pavilion, on Saturday August 20th. Around noon, Ann and Sasha arrived to find the grill (left earlier by Greg and Bonnie), which they set up (they had the hamburgers and hot dogs).

While waiting for more people to show up (they did - we eventually had about 40, which exceeded the capacity of the shelter, so Karen and Joan went off and brought lots of plastic chairs), they broke out the games. Games were the theme of this year's picnic, particularly Gloom. Gloom is a very funny card game, with a totally ridiculous premise, very cool cards done in an Edward Gorey style of drawing, with odd little rhymes.

At one point we had one table playing Munchkin, one table playing Chez Goth, and one table playing Gloom. And then there were those who sat out on a big towel, or on the ground, talking and playing with electronic toys.

The picnic was going strong when the sky clouded up and rain came with a rush. Everybody crowded into the pavilion, and made jokes about the rain. Diane's visitor from California, Jill Hardy, (an alphan), danced in the rain (it doesn't do this in California, she says). The rain paused, and a number of people went home, but a substantial part of the group hung in through the next storm (particularly the third group to play Gloom).

No one went away hungry, needless to say; a number of people had some problems finding the grove, and turned up late. I'm told there was a fascinating light show in the sky that entertained those who stayed until thrown out of the park.





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 specialties, 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, Charlaïne: 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 dinky (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-

tured a memorable quote about John Clute's 'doctrine of excessive candor' (referring to reviewing books by friends), a panel with the Guests of Honor, an excellent discussion on patenting DNA, a panel on politics, and one on what it's like living in an 'old' structure, featuring a panelist who is a Jesuit working at the Vatican, an academic, a member of the British Civil Service, and a member of the RAF. And that was the first day.

Over the next four days, I went to a number of panels in the Science Fiction Foundation track. These are academic panels, featuring papers and presentations by people from universities all over the English speaking world, discussing sf and fantasy as serious literature. A number were highly entertaining; most notable were a Welsh gentleman who spoke extemporaneously on "Visions of Wales as seen through Thursday Next" (the Jasper Fforde series) and a young woman from Indiana University (Indiana) whose talk about anime was entitled "Militant Protestants and Gun-toting Vampires." There were several panels I couldn't get into, since the nice young suits that came with the Convention Center wouldn't let more people into the room once it was SRO. And that did happen more than once. There was a panel on colonization that was my third choice that turned out to be informative; it was supposed to be on ethics, but turned into a discussion of models and methods. A panel on "The Dead God in SF and Fantasy" produced a pair of cool quotes: "Slaying God is an act of pathological revenge," and "What if science fragmented the way religion has?" I attended a memorable (if crowded) conversation between John Clute and Gary K. Wolfe. A discussion on the Aesthetics of Fantasy produced: "Fantasy is the unknowable." (Michael Swanwick), "Fantasy is dissonant literature, contrasting the fantastic with the mundane" (Susanna Clarke, Hugo novel winner); "Fantasy should have radical alienation, defamiliarization" (China Mieville). And one of the last panels on Monday, entitled "Everything You Need to Know to Set Your Fantasy in Scotland" produced the advice "it's not your primary mission to educate people" followed by a description of the neatly dressed pipers playing for money along Edinburgh's Royal Mile as "shortbread soldiers."

Friday night was a play/presentation/travesty done by Reductio Ad Absurdum entitled "Lucas Back in Anger." The first portion was a lively if somewhat cursory run through the first three movies, featuring a small and dedicated cast; then the two gentlemen responsible for the whole thing came out and did an insanely inspired number covering the rest of the movies using Abba songs with deviated lyrics. My personal feeling is that we did a better job on the first three (our musical travesty was entitled "The Once and Future Jedi" and was set to the music from Camelot), but the bits with the Abba songs could not be topped.

Saturday night was the Masquerade. It wasn't as spectacular as some I've seen -- only two Master costumes. It's a shame because the new Armadillo (auditorium with stage and lights) is a super facility. Sunday night it housed the Hugos in fine form. The ceremony was notable on two counts: it was the short-