

Next Meeting

Next Meeting: 13 December 2003 **Topic:** Holiday Party!
12:30 PM to 4:45 PM (See page 2 for details and directions.)

Location: Ann Cecil's house

PARSEC Tentative Meeting Schedule

January 2004

Date: 10 January 2004

Discussion Topic: TBA

Location: Squirrel Hill Branch of
Carnegie Library

February 2004

Date: 14 February 2004

Discussion Topic: TBA

Location: Squirrel Hill Branch of
Carnegie Library

March 2004

Date: 13 March 2004

Discussion Topic: Convention Panel

Discussion conducted by Ann Cecil

Location: TBA

PARSEC

Pittsburgh Area's Premiere Science-Fiction Organization

P.O. Box 3681, Pittsburgh, PA 15230-3681

President - Chris Ferrier

Vice President - Steve Turnshek

Treasurer - Greg Armstrong

Secretary - Sarah-Wade Smith

Commentator - Ann Cecil

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

Digressions

Chris' Comments

I stopped at the WaterWorks Mall on my way home after the November PARSEC meeting. After holiday shopping and buying pet supplies, I ended up at Barnes and Noble. Book junkies always end up where the books are. I overheard two people talking about the lunar eclipse while I browsed.

Back outside, I looked up and saw that a dark crescent already covered a small piece of the full moon. Meanwhile, a large number of shoppers walked to and from the stores, totally unaware of the celestial event taking place in the sky above them.

People once watched the sky constantly, using it as a calendar or looking for portents.

The ancient Egyptians called the New Year "The Opening of the Year" and celebrated it when the dog star Sirius, the brightest star in the sky, rose. During a 70 day period, Sirius, the Earth, and the Sun are nearly in line, so that the light of the star vanishes in the brightness of the Sun. At the end of this period, Sirius reappears just above the eastern horizon, an astronomical event called its heliacal rising. This usually occurred when the Nile River started rising. (The construction of the Aswan Dam in 1968 now prevents this.) The Nile flooded the cultivated land every year between June and October, leaving behind alluvial silt to fertilize the soil. The Egyptians honored the star as the goddess Sopdet, depicted as a woman with a star on her head.

Evidence at Stonehenge indicates it was used for observation of both the Sun and Moon. The axis of the monument aligns with the midsummer sunrise. Stonehenge was built and rebuilt from 3050 B.C. to 1600 B.C. During this time period, the first pyramids were constructed in Egypt.

Another site from the same time period is the Newgrange passage grave in Ireland. The tomb is a turf-covered stone mound with a 70 foot long passageway constructed of gigantic stone slabs. For a few days around the winter solstice, the rising sun shines down the passage way and lights the 20 foot high vault of the tomb chamber.

The Gospel of Matthew tells of wise men from the East who came to Jerusalem seeking the king of the Jews.

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The
Official
Newsletter
of
PARSEC



They had seen a new star in the sky and wanted to worship him.

In the current century, much of the night sky is dimmed by light pollution.

I've always lived in one or another of these areas. For that reason, I didn't see the Milky Way until I was twelve. The night sky filled with billions of glittering stars made a lasting impression on me. The universe was vast and ancient and there I was, less than a dust mote, watching it. A few years later when I read Sir Arthur C. Clarke's "Against the Fall of Night", I encountered the same concepts of immense spans of time and space. I've read science fiction ever since, searching for that sense of wonder.

That sense of wonder the shoppers were missing.

Traffic between the mall and my house kept me too busy to catch more than a glimpse of the moon. The shadow grew from a thin sliver to a big bite. By the time I reached my house, the eclipse was complete.

I walked out into my backyard. The night was clear and calm, as only cold winter nights are clear and calm. Tree branches stood out against the faint glow of light pollution like scattered black lace. The shadow moon hung over them. While I waited, I picked out constellations, the ones we all ought to know: the Big Dipper, Cassiopeia, the oval of mist that is actually the seven stars of the Pleiades. Slowly the moon grew bright and I experienced a sense of wonder again. HAPPY HOLIDAYS!

2003 Holiday Party

The party starts around 2pm and continues until Ann and Greg throw people out. It's done open-house style: people come when they can, stay as long as they wish, and bring friends, spouses, children, etc.

Those bringing small children should also bring some entertainment (video tapes, games, etc....) There is a TV upstairs, with equipment for playing DVDs and VHS tapes, in a separate room (keeping the sound from overwhelming the party downstairs).

People traditionally bring something but there will be some cookies and some real food made by the house, and this year Ann has a whole bunch of nuts and trail mix kinds of things to put out. Punch, of course, is traditional (and non-alcoholic); beer is in the basement (microbrews, mostly Penn and some Weyerbacher), also wine. Very little hard liquor. Mixed drinks are BYO.

So, bring stuff to drink (particularly if you have odd dietary requirements) and to eat (see comment above). There tends to be LOTS of sugary concoctions, some not so.

Ann's house is 2966 Voelkel Ave, in Dormont in the South Hills. Voelkel is a one-way block between Hillsdale and Potomac Aves, which makes it slightly more difficult to get to than you'd guess from a map.

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Announcements

- Worldwright News: Online fanzine Bli Panika is reprinting "The Turtle God" by Mary Soon Lee, in Hebrew yet! She also sold short story "Sarai" to the anthology MOTA 4: Integrity, a poem "Climber" to Capper's, and had two poems accepted by Pif.

Minutes - continued from page 4

the con and have them submitted before any relevant deadlines.

When dealing with reporters, remember that papers rarely assign there best people to things like s-f cons and be patient accordingly.

If pressed for money, pay your stars first, then work out some kind of deal with the hotel, etc. Stars tend to operate in a rather small social world, and failure to pay one on time may ruin your credit with the rest a lot faster than you can run out of hotels willing to take a chance on you.

Book reviews are the one item that most magazines will accept as unsolicited manuscripts, including the Post-Gazette and Renaissance magazine. Always check the name and spelling of the magazine you are submitting to and kept the review short and non-political.

However, Jeanne does suggest putting a *little* padding into what you submit. Remember, your editors actually do want to have something to edit.

Also remember that next month's meeting will be the annual Christmas party at Ann Cecil's. Food is always welcomed.

Sarah-Wade Smith, Secretary

Party - continued from page 2

From the trolley: Get off at Kelton, walk north (towards Pgh. on the sidewalk), cross Hillsdale and tracks, half a block west to Voelkel, and enter first house (not apartment bldg) on left side of ave.).

From East & North: Cross Mon on Liberty Bridge, go up West Liberty Ave. to Hillsdale, make right at light, drive down 4 blocks(across T tracks) turn right and find place to park. First house on left (not apartment bldg).

From South & West: Come north on Rte. 19 through Mt. Lebanon until road changes name to West Liberty: turn left onto Hillsdale at light and follow directions above.

For mavericks who come via parkways and get off on Greentree or Banksville: The blue belt signs point you to the climb up Potomac Ave, and then you have to cross the tracks, make a right on Belrose, right on Hillsdale, back over tracks, and right onto Voelkel, park etc. as above.

While phrasing her advice much more hilariously than your secretary can convey, Jean suggests when writing non-fiction, always assume your reader may not know as much about the background of the subject as you do. Be careful never to leave out essential information.

Always take deadlines dead seriously. Your publishers certainly will. If a piece is not in by the stated deadline, it will simply not be run and you will simply not be paid for it.

If the publication you are writing for has a stylebook, refer to and use it. For example, Jeanne suggests that one reason Afro-Americans prefer to be called that is that in the N.Y. Times stylebook, "Afro-American" is capitalized, "black" is not.

"Hot News" means stories that are just now breaking and which are deemed important enough to be require immediate publication even though there may not be time to fully check the facts behind them. This is actually considered a valid defense to charges of libel, provided there genuinely was no time to check.

As expressed by that great philosopher, J. K. Rowling, "Newspapers exist to sell themselves". Always remember this because it dictates their priorities on which stories will actually run and where in the paper they will run. "Grab them by the nose with the first paragraph" is always good advice.

It also dictates how headlines are written, an art form Jeanne likens unto haiku. She mourns the death of the old art of page layout due to the use of photo layout software today. For the record, in traditional layout tech, each horizontal inch is divided into 72 points. The size of a typeface is expressed in the number of points wide each letter is.

Always remember that in any literary field, plagiarism and the stealing of ideas does happen, but it can be very hard to prove. Therefore, always make and retain a dated copy of any item you submit for publication for your own files to prove prior creation.

There are two kinds of interviews in journalism. One is the traditional Question & Answer session, which the journalist then bases her summary on. The other, known as the "Playboy" interview simply presents a transcript of the actual conversation between interviewer and interviewee. What magazine you are writing for will determine which kind you can or should use. In either case, no matter how good your recorder, always bring a notebook with you and use it. Recorders can always break down at the least convenient times.

Finally, when doing publicity for cons, always make sure your flyers and press releases are concise and interesting. "Grab them by the nose" all over again. As a veteran of doing publicity for a costumecon, Jeanne reminds us to get all press releases ready by at least three months before

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Blade Dancer

by S. L. Viehl

review by James J. Walton

Blade Dancer, S. L. Viehl, ROC, Penguin Group USA Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York NY 10014, August 2003, hardback, 314 pages, ISBN 0-451-45926-1, US \$22.95, CAN \$34.50

Half human and half alien, Jory Rask has the misfortune of being caught by government authorities while she buried her dead mother in an unmarked grave. Because her mother was an unregistered alien, Rask, who was born on Earth and passed for human while becoming a Shock Ball star, is deported immediately. With no prospects Rask decides to find and kill her father, the human pirate who caused her mother to be exiled to Earth.

Rask's first task is to track down her "siblings" a small group of half-breeds like herself who are outcast from the Joren society. The seven of them share a common pain and shame. This motley band decides to follow Rask as she goes to seek training as a *Blade Dancer*, a highly trained assassin. Together they form an unbeatable team and learn to trust each other, even though they do not get along.

Blade Dancer takes place in a future where faster than light travel between star systems is common place and an uncounted number of alien races populate the galaxy. All of these races seem to be vaguely humanoid, carbon based, breathe oxygen and feel comfortable in Earth-normal gravity. And they can interbreed. Okay. I guess I can accept this.

Blade Dancer seems to be set in the same universe as the author's StarDoc books. As such, Ms. Viehl doesn't much waste time with background about the politics and wars that are important to the resolutions of the book. In that respect the book fails as a stand-alone novel.

Blade Dancer is quite predictable at many points but the action rarely slows down, as the author takes her characters on a whirlwind journey of revenge and self- discovery.

While there is nothing wrong with Blade Dancer, I did not enjoy it nearly enough to be motivated to seek out other works by Ms. Viehl. This may be because so much background is taken for granted or that I predicted several of the plot twists well before they occurred. I don't know. But when someone asked me if I would recommend Blade dancer I replied "No, not really."

Triangulation 2004

From editor **Barbara Carlson**, here are the submission guidelines for *Triangulation 2004*, the anthology of speculative fiction by Parsec members:

1. Must be a PARSEC member (include member number on front page of manuscript).
2. Up to 5,000 words.
3. Science fiction, fantasy or other genre as long as it has an SF or Fantasy aspect.
4. Nothing X-rated ... tasteful sex, violence, etc. okay if it relates to the story.
5. Electronic submission preferred; acceptable formats: .rtf or MS Word 2000.
6. Acceptable fonts: Courier, Times New Roman, Garamond, Arial, Helvetica.
7. Front page should contain your name, address, phone number, email address, number of words in story, PARSEC membership number, title of story and your pen name (if different from your real name). Standard manuscript format is a good place to start (and an excellent place to finish, too). Check out <http://www-2.cs.cmu.edu/~mslee/format.html> for an explanation.
8. Deadline for submission: March 31, 2004.
9. Final acceptance dependent on satisfactory completion of requested revisions; asking for revisions does not guarantee acceptance.
10. We'll be paying a penny word, like we did for *Triangulation 2003*.
11. You may send submissions to me at bcarlson@andrew.cmu.edu
12. If you can't send it electronically, you can send it to:
Triangulation 2004
c/o Barbara Carlson
145 Margaret Street
Pittsburgh, PA 15210-2236
13. No handwritten manuscripts.

November Minutes

The November meeting was held at the First Unitarian Church in Shadyside. Nota Bene; your Secretary, who had still thought it was being held at the Allegheny Library Branch suggests checking the Parsec web-site to confirm meeting sights in future.

Treasurer Greg Armstrong reported that during the past month the group has taken in \$10 in new member dues, \$27 from the raffle and \$66 from the sale of Parsec merchandise. During the same period, the group expended about \$102 for postage, including the yearly rental on the group's mailbox and \$16 for copies of our previous incorporation papers.

Greg also announced that he would be attending the Inauguration of the Robot Hall of Fame the following week. The event was to be held at the Carnegie Science Center and was to feature the induction of two real and two fictional robots into the new Hall of Fame. Robbie the Robot was considered the odds on favorite in the fictional category although Chris Ferrier preferred to nominate HAL from 2001, *A Space Odyssey*.

It was further announced that former Parsecian Wendy (Wen Spenser) Kozak would be doing a local booksigning for her new book "Tinker" at the Monroeville Borders on 23 Nov., 2:00 PM.

David Brody has accepted the post of Sigma editor and all e-mails to the Sigma address will now automatically go to him.

Parsec officially welcomes Marvin Kelman as our newest member.

In further announcements, Kevin Geiselman has declared his candidacy for Parsec President, and Kevin Hayes will be running against Sarah-Wade Smith for V.P. Bill Coner and Greg Armstrong are both still unopposed for Secretary and Treasurer respectively.

Incumbent group President Chris Ferrier proposes the formation of a committee to find more alternative meeting sites. This is due to an upcoming renovation of the Squirrel Hill Branch of the Carnegie Library where Parsec has been meeting for the past several years. The renovations are expected to render the room we have been using unavailable to us for an extended period of time, so other sites need to be found. Volunteers are urgently solicited.

The only qualifications are a car and time to drive around and look for a place.

Greg Armstrong has suggested that he knows an old school building we can buy if we just all kick in \$10,000 each. It is not believed that he was serious.

This meeting's presentation was by Jeanne Martin on the subject of professionalism in writing. Jeanne is a longtime non-fiction writer with past publications in several local magazines, *Tournaments Illuminated* and others.

bustling America, with a fairly civilized, sophisticated east coast and a half-explored heartland. Names out of history are tied in: Aaron Burr and Blennerhasset, whose vision of an interior empire almost tore a young country apart. Locales that fascinate, and are rarely used: Mammoth Cave, in its early, recently discovered state. Even early Pittsburgh gets a mention.

Juxtaposed with real places and real events from the past are weird figures and people. The hideous and dangerous chacmool, initially resurrected by a sinister human plotter, the MesoAmerican immortal has plans of its own, plans that involve the destruction of all Humanity. The humans who can oppose it are a curious lot: a slave who resents his servitude (but how much?), a lost daughter who is unrecognizably burned; a father who has let his loss turn him into a drifting bum. And a man who is unfortunately dead, but doesn't let that stop him.

The story starts with a fire in New York City and builds to a roaring climax in Mammoth Cave, Kentucky. The undeniably weird and fantastic events are mixed so well with historical and geographical reality that the reader begins to believe along with the characters. The scene in Barnum's Museum where the mummy - the chacmool - comes to a kind of life is heartstopping, both exciting and seriously scary at the same time.

Inevitably the tension begins to lessen towards the end; it becomes clear who the good guys really are, and that they are going to win. But the trip is delightful, and the touches embellishing the book are wonderful. Each chapter is headed with Mexican month names; bits of Mexican poetry are cited, adding a touch of authentic strangeness to the mix (though Irvine may have made it all up, for all I know- still, some of it is very effective imagery). The book succeeds in reminding us of how little we know, even now, of the background of much of our country.

Live Without a Net

edited by Lou Anders

reviewed by James J. Walton

Live Without A Net, edited by Lou Anders, ROC, Penguin Group USA Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York NY 10014 July 2003, trade paperback, 321 pages, ISBN 0-451-45925-3, US \$14.95, CAN \$22.50

Live Without a Net is a themed anthology with the authors speculating on how our world would be without electronics, computers, cyberspace, or theInternet.

While all the stories in the book are well written, there was a certain dreary sameness to many of the stories with the authors using similar methods as substitutions for electronics. Genetic manipulation and slavery seemed to be the order of the day.

The book starts out with another fun romp from Michael Swanwick,

"Smoke and Mirrors, Parts I-IV," featuring his anti-heroes Darger and Surplus who live in a world where cyberspace is inhabited by demons and listening to a radio can lead to madness.

Things quickly become serious and sinister with tales from authors like Paul Di Filippo, Stephen Baxter, Charlie Stross, Paul Melko and Rudy Rucker.

Of the 18 stories presented, my favorite, which also happens to be the longest, is "The Swastika Bomb" by John Meany. He gives us an alternate England during the Blitzkrieg where huge, genetically engineered animals take the place of the Nazi war machines and the bombs are biological in nature. The story is also an homage to Ian Fleming and his famous character James Bond.

Live Without a Net is a very interesting anthology, however, I should not have sat down and read the stories straight through.

...And the Angel with Television Eyes

by John Shirley

Review by James J. Walton

...And the Angel with Television Eyes, John Shirley, Night Shade Books, 348 Pierce St., San Francisco CA 94117, 2002, trade hard cover, 240 pages, ISBN 1-892389-13-4, US \$27.00

I've never been quite sure how to categorize John Shirley's books. *City Come A-Walkin'* is a dark fantasy bordering on horror with Science Fiction thrown in. *Demons* starts out as straight horror then doubles back on itself to become Science Fiction. Now we have *...And the Angel with Television Eyes* which is part allegory, part Science Fiction and all hallucination.

Max Whitman is a moderately talented actor whose career is stuck in a rut. His success in soap operas and B movies caused him to be type cast in roles he finds unrewarding. When he seeks to broaden his horizons Max starts having strange visions of an alternate reality. As people around him are murdered, Whitman seeks help from a stalker/fan and learns of a plot by demonic creatures to destroy all of humanity, mainly because they find humans to be annoying. Whitman learns that he is much more than he imagined and he soon becomes the key to saving the Earth.

For odd reasons, the demonic creatures appear to be made from bits of machinery, metal, and plastic. The harpies have leather wings and day-glo wigs, the griffins are made from slivers of glass, and the Angel has television eyes.

The question I asked myself several times when I read this book was "What was Shirley on when he wrote this one?" Many of the images seem to come from a fever dream or a drug induced hallucination. We are def-

initely seeing a hallucination or complete breakdown from the inside as we watch Max watching his life disintegrate. Shirley's descriptions of the demons are nothing short of inspired and the depiction of Whitman, who is actually a bit of a creep, is very well done.

Although it is not for everyone ...*And The Angel with Television Eyes* is a keeper.

Permanence

by Karl Schroeder

review by James J. Walton

Permanence, Karl Schroeder, Tor Books, 175 Fifth Ave., New York NY 10010, May 2002, hardback, 447 pages ISBN 0-765-30371-X US \$27.95 CAN \$38.95

After stealing a space ship (which actually belonged to her) to escape her abusive brother, Rue Cassells discovers a large, uncharted object moving into Human space. She immediately lays claim to what she assumes to be a mineral rich comet. She soon learns that it is an ancient spacecraft filled with countless treasures. Instead of settling down to become a comet miner, Rue is suddenly a Cyclor Captain with all the potential wealth and prestige that goes with the position and her life becomes very complicated.

Cassells is a citizen of the Cyclor Compact, a civilization of planets that orbit brown dwarf stars. Cyclors are space ships that travel the trade routes, linking the planets. These slow ships take years to complete a circuit but they provide a vital lifeline for the planets they serve. After the advent of Faster Than Light ships many trading companies abandoned the brown dwarf routes to travel between the Lighted Worlds and the slow Cyclors fell into disrepair or were dismantled. A new Cyclor means new prosperity for any world it visits and is vital for the continued existence of the Cyclor Compact.

Of course, others have designs on Cassells' ship and her life is in danger. With the aid of a cousin she didn't know existed (and whom she doesn't trust) Cassells takes possession of her find and learns to deal with the rest of the galaxy, all while trying to figure out her Cyclor's real purpose.

One of the subplots of the book deals with the idea of *Permanence*, an odd, futuristic religion which, I confess, I didn't fully understand. It influences the actions of several important characters, almost causing disaster.

There is intrigue, war, romance and murder in *Permanence*, as well as a young, intelligent and resourceful heroine. Most, (not all) of the situations are believable and the action is well written. Anyone have a copy of Schroeder's other novel, *Ventus*, that I can borrow?

Books

Monstrous Regiment

by Terry Pratchett

reviewed by Ann Cecil

Books by Terry Pratchett, in general, should be read in private, in your bedroom or study, where no one can be disturbed by repeated bursts of uproarious laughter. The newest book conforms to the pattern; while the targets seem hopelessly cliched, Pratchett skewers so skillfully that you find yourself helplessly gasping for breath between laughs.

This time out we have Polly, a barmaid who is a step above, since she is the owner's daughter, but who works as hard as any and is cynical and worldly beyond her years. She puts on men's clothing and joins the army to rescue her brother, as no one else is going to. Since this is the Discworld, her fellow recruits comprise an odd assortment indeed: a troll, a vampire, an Igor, as well as other young people from Borogravia. Borogravia prides itself on being always at war with somebody: neighboring countries, primarily, but lately even with that distant center of depravity and civilization, Ankh-Morpork.

Ankh-Morpork, not pleased at having its property attacked, has sent Vimes to straighten out the situation. As a Captain of the Guard, Vimes was unorthodox; as an Ambassador, he passes unorthodox and goes on to unheard-of, eccentric, and devious.

With Vimes in the book, it becomes obvious this is not your standard "War is Hell" polemic.

There are messages in the book, but as in most of Pratchett's Discworld novels, the messages sneak up on you, lodge in the back of your head, and work subtly to make you aware of how ridiculous many attitudes and traditions are.

The fun in this book, besides watching Vimes skulk on the sidelines, is in watching Polly and the other recruits neatly dislocate their superiors, as they manage, out of sheer desperation, to bring the war to a reasonably honorable close. All of the recruits share a secret; they gain strength initially from sharing the truth, and then decide to come out of the military closet completely, causing all kinds of interesting furor. The secret - and the theme - are fairly obvious, but Pratchett makes the whole better than the sum of its parts.

A Scattering of Jades

by Alexander C. Irvine

reviewed by Ann Cecil

This first novel enormously benefits from the use of a very unfamiliar mythology: the Mexican. It is set in the 1840's in America; expansionist,