

Next Meeting

Next Meeting: 8 November 2003
12:30 PM to 4:45 PM
Please: We encourage people to bring a munchie or drink contribution...pop, chips cookies, etc.

Location: First Unitarian Church of Pittsburgh, 605 Morewood Ave., Pittsburgh, PA.
Topic: Jean martin on writing nonfiction

PARSEC Tentative Meeting Schedule

December 2003

Date: 13 December 2003
Holiday party!
Location: Ann Cecil's House

February 2004

Date: 14 February 2004
Discussion Topic:TBA

January 2004

Date: 10 January 2004
Discussion Topic: TBA
Location: Squirrel Hill Branch of Carnegie Library

March 2004

Date: 13 March
Discussion Topic: 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 Editor - David Brody

Meetings - Second Saturday of every month.

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



S I G M A

November
2003
Issue
212

The
Official
Newsletter
of
PARSEC



Chris' Comments

Digressions

By the time you read this Labor Day will be history. Summer is officially over. After the endless winter followed by the endless rain, I'm hoping for an autumn of bright leaves, sunny days, and crisp, clear nights.

Summer is vacation time for most people. Choices must be made between the beach, the mountains, and the theme parks. Which got me thinking about ultimate vacation destinations. What if you could travel to strange exotic locations, not on planet Earth, but to the places your favorite authors have created in books.

What would the literary travel agency have to offer?

The dystopias wouldn't have much appeal. Nor would most of the horror settings, except for the occasional day trip equivalent of the haunted walk on Halloween. Traveling to Lovecraft's Kadath to view the Elder Gods while skipping the rest of the pantheon is a possibility.

Many other, more accessible possibilities, are listed in the brochures. Places to consider include Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars, C. J. Cherryh's Downbelow Station, David Brin's Uplift worlds, Ursula K. LeGuin's Earthsea, Isaac Asimov's Foundation worlds, Anne McCaffrey's Pern, James Schmitz' worlds of the Hub, Andre Norton's Witch World, Arthur C. Clarke's Thalassa, Douglas Adams' Hitchhiker's worlds, and C. S. Lewis' Narnia, to name just a few. I'm sure you can think of many others.

You may, at this point, have noticed some obvious omissions. I'm getting there.

Personally, I'd like to visit huge, ancient, crumbling Gormenghast Castle, the creation of Mervyn Peake. Imagine walking through its maze of passageways and numberless rooms, some long forgotten. The decor of the guest suite alone would provide hours of discovery. The minds of the occupants are as labyrinthine as the castle. Certainly not a dull place.

Gormenghast Castle is the setting of the trilogy, "Titus Groan", "Gormenghast", and "Titus Alone" written by Mervyn Peake over fifty years ago. They are out of print. But anyone who is interested in scheming, over-the-top characters who live their lives without leaving the immense Gothic jumble of their castle should try looking for them.

Larry Niven's Ringworld would be my next stop. Imagine traveling in a spaceship toward the great structure of the ring. Just trying to comprehend the size of Ringworld would be worth a trip. Then there's the mountain, Fist-of-God, actually a puncture in the ring, which would make Mt. Everest seem small.

I've always found Arrakis fascinating. An entire planet wouldn't have a land surface that's 99% desert. But if it did exist, I'd like to cross the sand and see a sandworm. Of course, the addictive spice is a problem.

My personal ultimate destination is J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle Earth. Not very original, but I'd go there in a flash if I could buy a ticket. Middle Earth has thousands of years of history, hobbits, elves, daunting mountain ranges, vast plains, and the occasional wizard. The traveler could have a pint in the Prancing Pony Inn, stroll through Fanghorn Forest (Ents permitting), and explore the Glittering Caves, arriving in Minas Tirith to see the royal court.

I'm sure you can think of many other places.

"If there were dreams to sell, What would you buy?"

Thomas Lovell Beddoes

Postscript: In a previous Sigma, I mentioned Anthony Burgess' use of created words in "A Clockwork Orange". I'd like to thank Bill Hall for pointing out that the words appear to have a source in Russian.

Announcements

- Science Fiction legend and frequent Confluence program participant Hal Clement (Harry Stubbs) died in his sleep on October 29th at his home in Milton, Mass. He was 81 years old. Donations in Harry's memory may be made to the Joslin Diabetes Development Office (joslin.org/donate/commemorate.shtml) or St. Michael's Episcopal Church, 112 Randolph Ave, Milton MA 02186.

- PARSEC member Mary Soon Lee had 6 poems in a mid October edition of Pulp, one of the free weekly Pittsburgh papers.

- Following in Mary's footsteps, Tim Esaias has five poems on page 22 of the October 30th issue of Pulp.

- Wen Spencer is featured in the November issue of Pittsburgh magazine. She will be signing copies of her new book, *Tinker* at the Monroeville Borders on Sunday, November 23, at 2:00 pm.

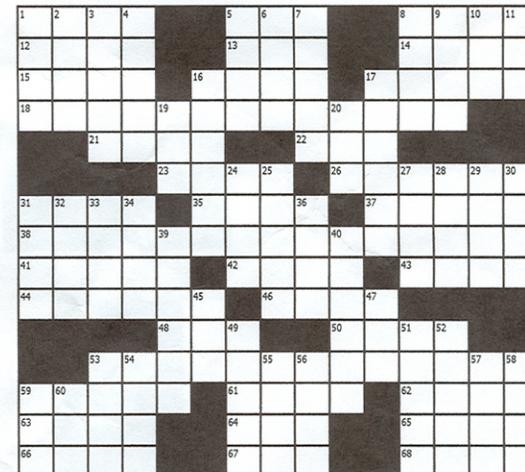
Crossword Puzzle

Across

- Brickyard units
- Shakespearean unit
- A dull sound
- La __ Bonita* – Madonna song
- Spoil
- Grinder
- Fulfill expectations
- Desert container
- "What are you __?"
- One more Theodore Sturgeon novella?
- Greek Cupid
- A simple hobbit
- Isinglass
- Showed no respect for slang
- Opposed to
- Orkan greeting
- TNT part
- Later Robert A. Heinlein novel?
- 1984 and 1988 men's figure skating silver medalist
- Cairn terrier of 1939 film
- What a 68 Across look like
- Inventor's goal
- Cry at *Cheers*
- Bob's and Art's Big Three companion
- "Eating goober __"
- Next Murray Leinster short story?
- Blazed
- Noted Christian
- Margarine
- Did not fail
- Pac. state
- "__ But the Lonely Heart"
- Slaughter of Cardinals
- Join
- __ of Fangorn

Down

- Life's partner
- Confused



Matthew Urick

- Freshman at USMA
- Lecher
- Star Trek* episode, "*__ Time*"
- Flog
- Lock
- G
- Next in line
- Subject of a Keats ode
- Hound
- Place where the house has an edge?
- A noted theory no longer held
- Common tattoo theme
- Passing fancy
- Horse follower
- Negatively charged particle
- Filter
- Heinlein's double?
- First name in mysteries
- 1996 presidential candidate
- Above
- Group that's a drag?
- Essay, e. g.
- __ *fixe*
- Golden rule word
- "...if you're naughty __"
- Lethargy
- Foreman/Fraser result
- Sign in most restaurants
- Fund
- Expiate
- Beauty parlor
- Man from U.N.C.L.E., Napoleon __
- Means justifiers
- Bleak
- Male and female
- Dollar part
- Online digits?
- Haggard novel
- Egg layer



Bookshelf

SERVICE OF THE SWORD & CROWN OF SLAVES

It seems to feel right to be dealing with these latest two entry's in the Honor Harringtonverse since *Service of the Sword* seems in some ways like a prequel to *Crown of Slaves*. About half the sex stories in *Sword* feature characters (or their parents) who reappear in *Crown*.

Both books are, in a sense, Honor Harrington spin-offs in that they are set in the same universe as the Harrington books, but Honor herself only appears in either as a walk-on, completely out of the main action.

Service of the Sword is a the fourth "shared-universe" Honor anthology, featuring stories by John Ringo, Judith Lindskold and Eric Flint as well as series creator Dave Weber himself.

Ringo's entries are short, comic and have the least to do with the main Honor Harrington storyline. In "A Ship Called Francis", a Manticoran Sick Berth Attendant who has transferred to the Greyson Space Navy in hopes of quick promotion discovers that he is instead assigned to the Omega Company of the fleet: a ship manned by all the goofballs, gold-bricks, foul-ups and just plain misfits nobody really wants. The captain has a very hands-off attitude towards command, the ship's chaplain insists on listing every grim fate they could possibly suffer at every prayer, the astrogator has gotten them lost and the XO keeps trying to explain to the captain that you really can court-martial everybody and give them the death penalty if the capt. would *just* let him do it!!

In "Let's Go To Prague", two Manticoran Marine covert infiltration types realize that there is no way their totally secret and not to be bragged about exploits are going to get them girls back on the home planet. So, they decide to take their leave on an *enemy* planet using false papers. Of course, the first thing that happens is they run into somebody they know from a previous op and she recognizes them, the second thing is that an enemy defector fleeing a botched exfiltration attempt practically trips over them and the third thing is the entire planet's police force has made them #1 on their wanted list. Getting back early from vacation may be a problem.

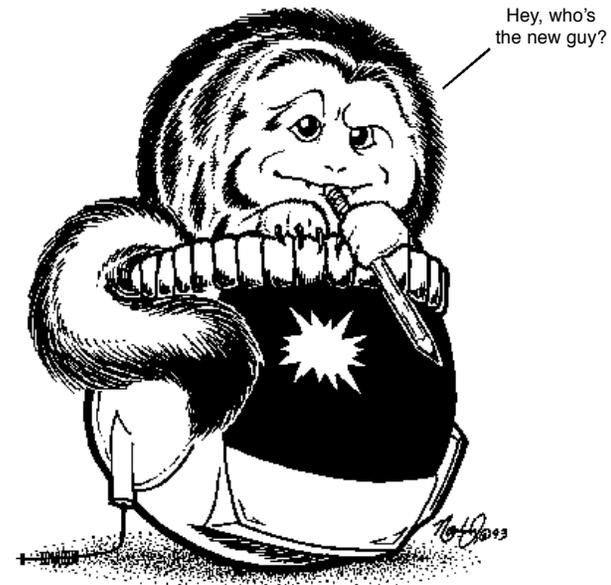
The title story, "The Service Of The Sword" is by Weber and follows the midshipwoman's voyage of Cadet Abigail Hearn, the first woman from

arrived 300 years ago and have taken over running some part of the Earth (America being the exception). The novel is set at the end of their rule; the aliens plan to go home and leave Humanity to its own devices. Catherine has not only a human name, she also has an almost Human body, the result of genetic morphing done to an alien foetus.

The aliens experience reincarnation, and Catherine is the reincarnation of a character from the first book, the Third Officer, who was a key player in the ship's decisions (both to land and to take over Earth). Because of her form, and because of guilt from the Third Officer's acts, Catherine spends most of her time with Humans. The Phoenix Café is the center of a rebel group of young people who draw her into their games and intrigues. Any gamer reading this will be enchanted and envious of their setup; that turns out to be a key plot point. Ms. Jones is a commendably sneaky author.

A good deal of the book involves discussions, either monologues or dialogues, about the reality of reincarnation (Catherine wavers back and forth about how true it is), the need for self-determination, the war between the sexes (taken more literally here), and the motives behind some fairly kinky sex. A tribute to Ms. Jones' skill as an author is that the discussions continue to be interesting, and don't particularly slow down the book. The book, like most of her work, is at turns fascinating, thoughtful, and memorable. It is not a fast read, but offers more profound rewards.

Recommended by Ann Cecil



Screenings

ONE Is Not So One After All: The Matrix - Revolutions

It's a cinch that a lot of people are disappointed by *The Matrix: Revolutions*, but it would have taken a miracle — a miracle worthy of Neo himself — for it to be anything else. The expectations raised by *Reloaded* were so sky-high that the Brothers Wachowski would have to be genuine geniuses to match them. Apparently, they're not. They have many great qualities, not the least of which is the ability to divert us with several very choice red herrings, but they're ultimately sloppy. But then again, so are the last two *Star Wars* movies, and at least the Matrix movies are more interesting.

All that said, I enjoyed myself, though I suspect I had far fewer expectations than many others did. I rather wish that for all the time taken up by the Sentinels' siege on Zion's dock — as the most gigantic drill bit in several galaxies comes crashing down, it's a wonder no one jokes "Now that's what I call being REALLY screwed!" — there could have been an extra moment of clarification at the end. Is Neo now the "soul" of the Matrix? There are suggestions aplenty but dreadful few particulars.

The symbology becomes particularly Christian, although with an illuminating twist. We generally get told that Evil just sort of happened, but the Matrix offers a more satisfying tale. Apparently, the Architect keeps seeking equilibrium, in spite of the human belief in free choice, and Agent Smith is his equilibrium seeker. As the Matrix panicks, Smith multiplies. I am reminded of the angelological tale of Amitiel, in which the angel Amitiel argues that God should not make Man because Man is a very untrue creature. Before creating Man, God has Amitiel destroyed. I got to thinking of the Architect as a kind of undestroyed Amitiel who creates Smith to balance the equation, but Smith grows into his own Satan.

However you see it, this has its diversions and I'm glad to have caught it — however, if I ever buy any of these, I think I'll just get the original Matrix and forget all about these pretensions to a trilogy. The fact is that much this same ground has been covered before, in movies like *The Thirteenth Floor* or, perhaps most of all, *Dark City*. The moral of making the Matrix is obvious: if you're going to proclaim The One, doublecheck to make sure that he is not already overshadowed by Others.

Reviewed by Bill Hall

October Minutes

Owing to the annual used book sale, the meeting began late, assorted Parsecians having the need to slake their book buying addictions. This includes your Secretary.

First order of business was Greg Armstrong's Treasurer report. The largest items of expenditure for the last year were expenses for putting on Confluence, and postage which amounted to \$621.69 for the year. It should be noted that Confluence is, in fact, a separate business entity from Parsec and usually operates out of Mary Tabasko's own bank account for most purposes, but it is the usual procedure to lend expense money for up front expenses involved in the con from Club funds and be reimbursed from the proceeds of the con.

Such reimbursements amounted to \$1892.30 this year, together with \$686.00 in received members dues, and \$113.00 from the monthly raffle, which altogether gave us a balance of \$347.74 income over and above expenditures. This figure does not include some moneys still owed Diane Turnshek from sales of *Triangulation*.

Discussion was also had on the efforts to incorporate Parsec as a 501.c.3 after a report on the last committee meeting. We still need to obtain a copy of the organization's previous Articles of Incorporation. It likewise appears that we may need to create a revised set of By-laws to conform with 501.c.3 requirements and to at some point, legally dissolve the old club in order to pursue the new incorporation.

Much discussion centered around the fact that by current bylaws, all changes must be voted on by membership with a written notice of the text of said changes sent to all members not less than 30 days before the vote. It was felt by some that such a revision could be more effectively carried out by delegating the task to a committee. However, doing so would also require amending the bylaws, and also a number of members felt uneasy about delegating so much authority to the officers.

Finally nominations were held for next years Officers and following slate was nominated:

President - Dan Block	Vice-President - Sarah-Wade Smith
Secretary - Bill Covert	Treasurer - Greg Armstrong
Commentator - Ann Cecil	

Members wishing to run in opposition to this slate are encouraged to throw their hats in the proverbial ring at the November meeting. Members are further advised that, if nominated, Chris Ferrier will not run for anything. If elected, she will refuse to pay her dues and avoid all meetings like the plague for six months. Don't even think about it!

Sarah-Wade Smith, Secretary

under the pre-revolutionary regime that was just as bad as its successor, so he has a reason. In an earlier story, "From The Highlands", Victor learned that his beloved Revolution was not as clean and innocent as he thought, a discovery that pushed him into a resistance group within the Peep power structure.

Victor is a shy, sweet nerdy kid with few friends. One of the few, Ginny Usher describes him as "the sweetest kid in the world", but even she admits when he has to, he can turn into a "col, fish-eyed bastard" capable of shoving someone up against a gym wall and personally shooting them in the back of the head to make a point.

Which is part of what he's doing in this one. Victor has just been sent out to a relatively quiet sector to investigate the assassination of the local head of StateSec. The local head turns out to have been a corrupt serial killer whom Victor would have loved to shoot himself. To solve the case, he unleashes a ruthless reign of terror...except that all the people he ends up executing seem to be other StateSec agents with bad reps. Victor is certainly being brutal and thorough...but just what is he actually trying to do? Especially when word of a coup d'etat back on the capital threatens to plunge the entire sector into chaos.

As I said, many of the stories in *Sword* seem to be prequels to *Crown of Slaves*, a spin off novel billed as a collaboration between Weber and Eric Flint. However, I think Flint is the main author of this one since it seems to use more of his characters: Victor Cachat, Ginny Usher, and the Zilwicki family, Jeremy X, etc. along with the return of Weber's drawling, veddy upper-crust Cpt. M. Oversteegen and Judith of Grayson's daughter, Princess Ruth Winton. Appearing for the first time are Web DuHavel and Thandi Palane.

If I criticize the previous collection for having great action but too little character development, I have no such complaint with this one. The characters, if a little improbable at times are nevertheless one of the wonderful points of the book.

A favorite high point early on is a dinner party at which Professor DuHavel, a distinguished academic and escaped former slave lectures a dinner party of Manticore's wealthy liberals on the history of slavery and racism, a lecture that raises hackles because the Royal Family of Manticore, happen to be ...black. "You mean, they would have...the Queen?!!" Not to mention his meeting with Oversteegen, who may be a devout conservative, but who loves honest debate almost as much as DuHavel himself.

Another humorous moment is Oversteegen informing a particularly obnoxious Manticoran diplomat, who also happens to be his cousin that she is "...not just stupid, Barbera, truly ..ba-rain-less. As in, brains of a carrot!"

As to the plot, Princess Ruth, the daughter of Judith of Grayson adopted by her now husband, Prince Michael Winton, has decided she wants to be secret agent and she wants Capt. Anton Zilwicki, formerly of Naval Intelligence to train her. This is a ticklish request since the agency really doesn't want to endanger a member of the Royal Family. However, sending her off to attend the funeral of a martyred anti-slavery agitator in the Republic of Erewhon seems safe enough, especially with Capt. Zilwicki's adopted daughter Berry acting as a double for her.

At the same time Ginny Usher arrives as representative of her husband Kevin and the Peep government, which has always genuinely supported the movement to end genetic slavery. Naturally, Ginny is accompanied by her alleged "boytoy" Victor Cachat. And naturally, they are really there to see if the arrogant manner in which the High Ridge administration on Manticore has been treating all its allies is opening up any opportunities of detaching Erewhon from Manticore.

Of course, there might be some problems from the Mesans, an "independent" planet that practices genetically engineering clones as custom designed slaves and selling them to whoever will meet their price. Their whole sales pitch is a fraud to begin with, and they are illegal as hell just about anywhere, but there are always authorities willing to look the other way for a big enough bribe. Web DuHavel and Ginny Usher are both products of their labs as is the clowning but deadly assassin, Jeremy X. Victor and the Zilwickis also hate them with an equal passion.

What nobody is counting on is the presence of Ruth's half-brother Gideon and his cell of refugee Masadan mercenaries in Mesan pay. Still planning to avenge Judith's escape from Masada twenty years before, Gideon attempts to kidnap the girls from a highly secure resort satellite. Before they know it, everybody is hip deep in a bloody terrorist shoot out that Victor is hoping to twist into an opportunity to liberate an entire planet of slaves-if he can survive the shoot-out, fast-talk everyone into going along with him, avoid getting killed by the hell-on-heels albino black amazon he's falling in love with and swallow the fact that Web and Jeremy X intend to make 18 year old Berry Zilwicki the Queen of the newly-freed planet.

What can I say, it's a genuinely fun read and even better for the history buffs who can follow all the historical allusions in the script.

Review by Sarah-Wade Smith

TRADING IN DANGER

by
Elizabeth Moon

You can rely on Elizabeth Moon to be entertaining. Her heroines are

always intelligent, plucky, and resourceful, even if they are also blinded by pride or youthful impulsiveness.

Trading In Danger is no exception. It introduces Kylara Vatta, the daughter of the CFO of Vatta Enterprises. Ky, when we first meet her, is in the local Space Force Academy, but she's about to be cashiered - thrown out in disgrace. Through an error in judgement, she broke rules, and prepares to face the unpleasant consequences.

As it turns out, her family takes over, to make the consequences considerably less unpleasant: they give her command of an old trading vessel and send her off to see what she can do with it. Initially, while the reader is entranced by the trading life, you do wonder if those consequences are ever going to be explored. It takes Moon a while, but things do come together in satisfactory and fairly realistic fashion.

Oh, yes, there are some plot twists: a war, a kidnapping by mercenaries, an accident in which our heroine almost dies, and a sinister mutiny which she puts down single-handed. Plenty of action and adventure, likeable characters, with a layer of observation and commentary: Moon delivers her usual mix. I am very glad to see her moving on - the Serrano books were beginning to stretch my suspension of disbelief (every time anything happens in the galaxy a Serrano is involved? Are they descendants of Jessica Fletcher?).

Recommended by Ann Cecil

PHOENIX CAFÉ

by

Gwyneth Jones

While *Phoenix Café* is the final book in a trilogy, it is perfectly possible to read it like a stand-alone book. In point of fact, I read the first book in the trilogy, and then read this one (by mistake, I thought this was the second). While I will eventually go back and read the middle book (*North Wind* is the title), I didn't notice any problems from having unintentionally skipped it. As a matter of fact, since Ms. Jones has a strong literary style, there are parts of the first book (*White Queen*) that I understood better after reading this book than I did while reading it.

Part of the reason is that Ms. Jones' strengths are unforgettable characters and vivid situations, not plot. Let me be clear: I am NOT implying that there isn't a respectable plot and narrative, simply that these are NOT the drivers for the novels. The ideas that make these works science-fiction are less technical engineering and more philosophical. Ms. Jones spends a minimum of time on how things work, and a maximum on the impact on her characters and their lives.

The center of *Phoenix Café* is Catherine, member of an alien race who

the ferociously sexist fundamentalist planet of Greyson to complete the naval academy of Manticore and face commission as a Greyson officer. The story is most notable because it introduces Capt. Michael Oversteegen, the drawling, annoying but very competent aristocratic officer who features again in *Crown of Slaves*. Hearn's problems dealing with her voyage and roommates are OK and the final naval battle against surprisingly well-equipped pirates is certainly tense and action packed, but one really can't avoid the feeling that it's all stuff Weber has done before in other stories.

Then again, if you thought the Greysons were misogynistic religious fanatics, bear in mind that in their past, they fought a bloody civil war against a more puritanical faction that believed that God would transmute the lethally poisonous atmosphere of Greyson into something harmless if only the Greysons would show their faith by destroying the tech that kept them alive. After their defeat, which they blame on a woman called Barbera Bancroft, the uber-fanatics were exiled to a planet they named Masada, from whence they vowed to return and smite their faithless enemies hip and thigh. It's not a place you want to be caught with two X chromosomes.

But it is a place where Judith of Greyson is caught. In "Promised Land" by Judith Lindskold, Judith, captured by Masadans when she was ten and forced into a "marriage" at twelve, is now a member of a small band of desperate women, the Sisterhood of Barbera who have been secretly training themselves with forbidden computer sims to fly a starship. Their hope is to hijack a Masadan starship and flee the planet. Once committed, their only alternatives will literally be succeed or die in the attempt. And the visit of a Manticoran diplomatic mission looks like just the diversion they need. However this puts the Manticorans in a ticklish position since they may not be able to convince the Masadans that their women could come up with this plot without outside help. And the Sisters own escape may hinge on being able to convince a Manticoran prince who has to decide to help them or preserve the chance of an alliance with Masada.

Once again, great action, but seems lacking in plot and character development.

The real selling point for me on the collection, however, was the Victor Cachat story, "Fanatic". Long time fans of the series will be aware that Honor and the Star Kingdom of Manticore are the good guys and the vile, revolutionary People's Republic of Haven, especially its brutal secret police, StateSec are emphatically the bad guys. Usually. Victor Cachat is a loyal agent of StateSec. He's also the hero.

More specifically, Victor is an idealist who genuinely believes in the Revolution and wants to serve it. Then again, Victor grew up in the slums