

January 2004 Meeting

Date: 10 January 2004 – 1:00 PM to 4:30 PM
Topic: Kevin Geiselman does a presentation on the late 1950's atomic spacecraft, Project Orion
Location: Squirrel Hill Branch of Carnegie Library, on the corner of Forbes and Murray

PARSEC Tentative Meeting Schedule

February 2004

Date: 14 February 2004
Topic: Writer Michael Arnzen
Location: East Liberty Branch of Carnegie Library

March 2004

Date: 13 March 2004
Topic: Convention Panel Discussion conducted by Ann Cecil
Location: East Liberty Branch of Carnegie Library

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

President - Kevin Geiselman
Treasurer - Greg Armstrong
Commentator - Ann Cecil

Vice President - Kevin Hayes
Secretary - Bill Covert

Website: trfn.clpgh.org/parsec

Meetings - Second Saturday of every month.

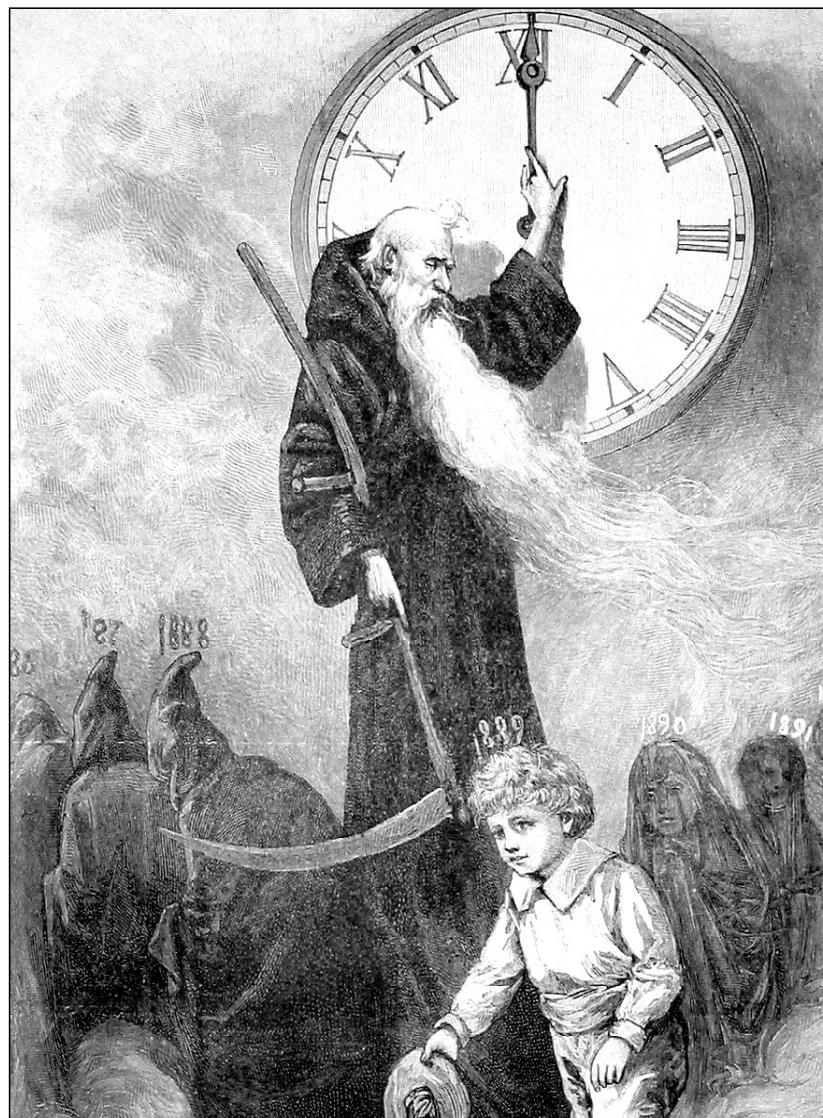
Dues: \$10 full member, \$2 Supporting member

Sigma is edited by David Brody
Send article submissions to: sigma@spellcaster.org



SIGMA

The Newsletter of PARSEC • January 2004 • Issue 214



The View From the Top

The President's Column - Kevin Geiselman

ep·ic ('e-pik) adj, extending beyond the usual or ordinary especially in size or scope

In the original Greek, *epikos* was simply a word for a speech or poem. But, even if a story falls under that category, with *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* as our primary examples, we could be forgiven for expecting more out of our *epikos*. And when it comes to film, our standards are very high indeed. *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Spartacus* spring to mind. Technicolor. Panavision. A cast of thousands. These films were epic undertakings in themselves. Massive productions under arduous conditions every bit as heroic as the events they portrayed.

Today the technology exists to make those almost impossible productions commonplace. Instead of going on location, realms can be produced digitally. Sets can be electronically painted into a scene. Anomalies can be painted out. Thousands of extras can be replaced by sophisticated software algorithms. The production of the epic has become readily available to many more filmmakers. But can they really measure up?

Stephen Spielberg's *Taken* was billed as an "epic mini-series". *The 10th Kingdom* and *Gladiator* received similar advertising. I picked up a *Star Trek* book that on the cover said "The start of an all-new Klingon epic". And while I consider Klingons to be epic characters, can any *Star Trek* novel really stand up to the power of the term "epic"? It seems that to the Hollywood machine, "epic" is just another adjective for "big". The latest *Star Wars* films are certainly very large but, to me at least, they seem to lack for genuine heroes.

I am glad to say that the true epic does still exist in filmmaking in the form of Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings*. And nothing makes that more clear than sitting in a theater for twelve hours to experience the entire trilogy in one sitting. Surely, it is big with unbelievably huge battles and vast panoramas but it is intimate as well. A story of heroes made from ordinary people. You see that in loving camera angles and marvelous performances. Homer would know and understand the importance of this story beyond that of mere entertainment.

And so it comes full circle. Perhaps. I saw a trailer for *Troy* due out this upcoming May. While I have no real sense of Brad Pitt's ability to portray Achilles, I have great confidence in Wolfgang Petersen's sense of epic as shown so well in *Das Boot*. But what struck me in the trailer was the Greek fleet. The scene started on the deck of a single ship and panned back to see more and more ships until hundreds of triremes

continued of page 10

Announcements

- PARSEC's newly elected officers are as follows:
President: Kevin Geiselman
Vice President: Kevin Hayes
Secretary: Bill Covert
Treasurer: Greg Armstrong
Commentator: Ann Cecil
- On Wednesday February 11, 2004, Diane Turnshek will be speaking at the Monroeville Library's Local Writer's Showcase. A panel of writers will talk in the library's Gallery Space from 7:30 PM to 8:30 PM, answer questions, and then sell and sign books. Authors with stories in *Triangulation*, Six from PARSEC and *Parallax Second Tales* are encouraged to come and sign, too. Monroeville Public Library, 4000 Gateway Campus Drive, Monroeville, PA 15146, (412) 372-0500
- Don't forget that the deadline for *Triangulations 2004* is March 31st. Submission guidelines can be found on the PARSEC website at:
<http://trfn.clpgh.org/parsec/works.html>
- Ken Chiacchia has an SF short story, *The Rescue Contact*, in the January/February issue of Cicada, a pro young adult literary fiction magazine.

Letters

Dear PARSEC people,

I want to thank you for electing me Vice President last year. It's been a busy year for me. I struggled to pass all my courses in the spring after missing 49 days of school with mono and other illnesses. This year, I'm a senior and working 35 to 40 hours a week and I only had one Saturday off (not a PARSEC meeting day). I'm sorry my participation has been so low. I enjoyed Confluence. I appreciate your voting for me to be a PARSEC officer. It meant a lot.

Steven Turnshek

ground? Doesn't that sound like a bad story idea, one you'd reject as a corny plot device?

Who would have thought we'd get into this century without a nuclear war? A lot of science-fiction written in the Golden Age assumed it would come - yet here we are, another year farther into the 21st century, and it hasn't happened.

Who would have thought a term like "greenback" would be obsolete? And yet our money is slowly but surely changing color. Twenties now look kind of pink, with green borders.

One of the hardest things, in trying to write fiction set in the future, is to avoid the slang terms we all take for granted, the references that are so quickly dated (the hero dialing long-distance, for instance, on a hand-set). And stories from the authors that guessed wrong (The Roads don't Roll and probably never will) are read as curiosities. There is a lesson there, I think; Heinlein's stories set around technical change are almost painfully dated now, but his stories that dealt with sociological impact, societal change are still fascinating and meaningful. Science-fiction demands that you get the science right, as far as possible, but it stays alive much longer when you don't get too specific about the extrapolations. Or when you make the characters and the situation much more important than the details of the extrapolation.

Another thing that the end of 2003 signals: it is the end of a publishing year, and for those who went to last year's Worldcon or are attending next year's, it's time to nominate work for the Hugos. It wouldn't be reasonable not to mention that our own Wen Spencer's first hard-cover novel, *Tinker*, is eligible for a Hugo. Not that we want to suggest you nominate it without reading it first, of course. Wen sent a copy for the PARSEC library, which is out on loan at the moment, but all members are encouraged to send me notes if they want to be next to borrow it.

And of course this is the end of Chris Ferrier's reign as PARSEC president and the beginning of Kevin Geiselman's rule. Chris made a valiant effort with an often difficult job, since she lives a goodly distance (Leechburg) from Pittsburgh. Her columns were thoughtfully, entertaining, and on-time (much appreciated by both the editor and the publishing staff). Chris pushed to get PARSEC another good-sized step towards the tax-exempt status we need. Geis will be equally diligent, while giving SIGMA and PARSEC a new flavor! Here's to a happy ending, and an equally happy beginning.

Notes From the Maintenance Department

The Editor's Column - David Brody



iMac. That's where I sit. Visit me some time or send a memo down the pneumatic chute. I'd love to hear from you.

Till then, this'll be my way of saying hi. After all, just because I have the name "Dave" sewn onto my industrial blue shirt and a bunch of keys hanging from my belt, doesn't mean I can't think for myself.

But, enough of indulging my fractured self image. Now for a little bit about my plans for Sigma.

Book reviews are great, especially as we all try to wade through shelves filled with colorful garbage to get to the handful of gems that publishers, seemingly by accident, allow into print. But I know for a fact that PARSEC members have a lot to say about a lot of things. Therefore, my first goal will be to expand Sigma's content to include discussions of trends, fads and the future of the genres that we all love. I encourage all of PARSEC's talented writers to participate.

Film is a huge part of the history of fantastic fiction and although a fantasy has never won a best picture Oscar, Hollywood continues to produce an ongoing stream of science fiction and fantasy epics. (There's that word again.) Let me know how you feel. I'm quite astonished to have received no review of *Return of the King* aside from Geis' mention in his first monthly column. I'll save room in the February Sigma for a discussion of the combined impact of all three films.

As we know, art and illustration is an important part the SF and Fantasy universe. Most conventions, including our own, have art displays of one sort or another and if Sigma is to reflect the diverse interests of PARSEC's membership then artwork needs to be a more regular part of its contents. Of course, we're currently limited by finances to black and white images only, but that may ultimately change and in the meantime submissions of quality artwork are encouraged.

I've had a chance to look at newsletters published by other fan groups and many of them are very impressive, not just in their look, but in the rich-

Continued from page 2

spread out to the misty horizon. Petersen is clearly using the 1200 ship Greek fleet as described by Herodotus and surely the material has epic potential but will it be truly an epic or will it just be big? Stay tuned.

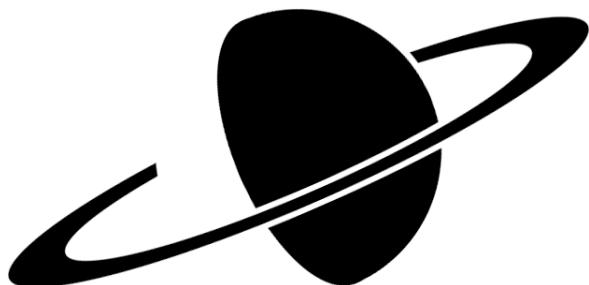
And so begins a hopefully epic new year for PARSEC. OK, not epic. Maybe not even "beyond the usual" but, like any journey at its beginning, full of unknown potential. The fulfillment of that potential relies on you. Your ideas can lead the club forward. Your talents can strengthen its foundations. Your found opportunities can keep us vibrant and interested. And your dues paid in a timely fashion can keep us afloat. I may be President but I am nothing without your support.

Geis

Continued from page 9

ness of their content. For an organization like PARSEC – which sports award winning writers and novelists, talented artists, and a large pool of members that love to be challenged by ideas – to produce anything less than the best possible monthly publication does our membership a disservice. I hope to help make the process of improvement possible.

Now, if you'll excuse me, there's a plumbing problem on page six. Forgive me while I grab a wrench, strap on my tool belt and head out to fix it.



Ends & Beginnings

Commentary by Ann Cecil

Another year is ending: this is the last of 2003. A new year starts: 2004. While it is not always true that the end of one thing is the beginning of another, certainly a great deal of life seems to follow this pattern.

As years go, 2003 had its good points and bad points. We saw the end of the Lord of The Rings: The Return of the King. I don't think there will be more fantasy from Peter Jackson - but Tolkien's written work, even though the author is long dead, has turned into a little industry all its own, with forgotten stories reprinted and endless books about the famous trilogy, examining it, its sources, its inspirations.

And the effect of the trilogy on written fantasy is only now being overthrown, with the inspiration of the "New Weird" group. It is fascinating that fantasy sources seem to come from England. While there are popular American fantasists, even ones who've produced classics (I'm thinking of Le Guin's *Wizard of EarthSea*), none of them seem to inspire the deluge of homage blending into outright imitation that Tolkien has, or that (I suspect) Mieville is going to.

In any case - the end of the movie, and its phenomenal commercial success, almost guarantee that we will see a series of Tolkien-style big fantasy movies coming our way for the next several years. I am surprised that the *Silmarillion* has not already been optioned - or did I miss that bit of news?

Other things that ended in 2003 include the restriction of space-going power to us and the Russians. The Chinese are out there now, and surprise, the Brits haven't given it up. We may see 2004 as the start of a new space race, but this time the focus seems to be Mars. With any kind of luck, we'll see the start of a real exploration of Mars, maybe even the seeds of the kind of exploration and terraforming predicted by the science-fiction of the 90's.

Science-fiction has continued to evolve, as the definitions of "what's sf?" "what's fantasy?" continue to be blurred. China Mieville, as a kind of representative of the latest wave of new ideas, (what Locus chooses to term the "New Weird"), has stated that he doesn't worry about definitions, about genre lines. He just writes good books, on subjects that interest him. And they are clearly somewhere within the sf/fantasy genre. Evolution of the genre is a natural thing, as life continues to amaze and surprise us. We still open the paper (or click on the webnews) and say "Who would have thought that..."

Who would have thought they'd find Saddam Hussein in a hole in the

from the technological remnants of a long dead alien civilization. (Harrison has said that she is his answer to Ann McCaffrey's *The Ship Who Sang*.)

Ed Chianese is a virtual reality addict drawn against his will into a complicated web of deceit and manipulation that I can say no more about without giving away too much.

Harrison takes us from one storyline to another, while leaving us a few cleverly planted clues as to their connection, then deftly ties it up in a very satisfying finish. The prose is top notch and the characters have an emotional richness that is a joy to sink your teeth into.

Light won't be out in the US until September, but you can get the British edition at Amazon UK. It's worth the poor exchange rate and high cost of shipping. While there you can dig deeper into the New Weird. Weird it is, not altogether new, but awfully good.

In the Forests of Serre

by Patricia McKillup
reviewed by Ann Cecil

Patricia McKillup's fantasies are always a treat; she writes clearly, smoothly, with engaging characters (even her villains are engaging) and ties together sometimes fairly thin plots with an emotional logic that is both satisfying to the reader and sufficient to sweep past any petty details.

Her latest book is no exception. Serre is a land of strange magic, concentrated in the thick forest that covers most of the small country. It has a king who rules with vehemence and vigor, cowing everyone, including his lovely but faded wife and his sole heir. The heir in question, Prince Ronan, is recently bereaved and not taking it well. The King, impatient for a dynasty, has arranged a marriage with Dacia, a neighboring kingdom that would rather be allied via marriage than amalgamated by the sword.

So we have a reluctant groom and Princess Sidonie, an equally reluctant bride, who of course meet by accident. The plot is further thickened by a wizard named Gyre, who has been charmed by the beautiful, brave and honest Sidonie. Gyre has been sent to watch over Sidonie and keep her safe by the elderly wizard Unciel; at least that's the ostensible charge to Gyre.

And Ronan has fallen into a cursed state, having met the Serran witch Brume, a fascinating creature with echoes of eastern European folklore and even more ancient myths. Brume's curses are enlightening and, while inconvenient, educational. Before it is over, there is a veritable parade of characters trooping through Brume's cottage. The cottage itself is a deli-

cious creation: Made of bone, it is built so that Brume can stick her large feet through the bottom, shave off, and run through the forest carrying her house about her. The description of the cottage pursuing an unlucky victim is one of the most vivid and delightful in the book.

This is highly recommended for reading on a snowy night, curled up in a warm blanket. [ok, I read it on the trolley, which is NOT warm or comfortable, but it felt like that.]

Wyrmhole

By Jay Caselberg
reviewed by Chris Ferrier

Jack Stein, P.I., has a new client. Outreach Industries has just paid him a retainer with the promise of a larger payment in the future if he learns why the company's mining crew on the distant planet, Dairil III, mysteriously disappeared.

While Jack is a cynical loner often found in detective fiction, the P.I. stands for Psychic Investigator. Instead of physically traveling around the galaxy or even his local city interviewing suspects and looking for clues, he dreams. He uses a piece of rock from Dairil III as a physical prompt which guides his subconscious to the location of the mine. When he awakens, he analyses the dream images and symbols. One recurrent dream symbol is the Ouroboros, the serpent devouring its own tail.

The city where Jack lives is called the Locality. It's a self-supporting machine using nanotechnology to literally mine its way by millimeters per week across the landscape. The forward end of the city has the newest, most expensive, living spaces, offices, and shops. Meanwhile, buildings at the opposite end are decaying as the microscopic building blocks breakdown and are recycled. This area is an urban jungle of abandoned buildings and criminal activity. Jack prefers the middle, but his case brings him into contact with individuals from both ends of the city. Caught in a tangle of deceitful suspects and betrayals, aided only by a Billie, a twelve year old girl who knows entirely too much, Jack doggedly presses on.

Wyrmhole is the first of a series. The characters are typical of noir detective fiction, but are well developed. The fast pacing keeps the reader turning the pages. The science fictional elements aren't explored in detail, but are used to drive the plot and provide an exotic background.

Conclusion: *Wyrmhole* is an entertaining mystery taking place in a futuristic setting.

December Meeting

PARSEC's last meeting of 2003 was the open-house party held December 13th at Ann Cecil's house, from 2pm in the afternoon until after midnight. The party was ended by the weather; the beginnings of a serious snowfall convinced the remaining guests to depart. The gamers, on the other hand, voted to opt for various couches, spare beds and air mattresses, so they could finish whatever strange campaign they had underway (the game of Iron Dragon actually finished earlier in the evening).

In the middle of the party (around about 7pm) the out-going President, Chris Ferrier, made off with the well-marked ballot box, counted up the votes, and declared the winners:

Kevin Geiselman, President, Kevin Hayes, Vice-president. Greg Armstrong, Treasurer, Bill Covert, Secretary, and Ann Cecil; Commentator.

Mark Stewart's chili was delicious as usual. Ann Cecil provided a beef stew (that she kept trying to talk people into eating as a goulash over noodles, but they scarfed it up before she could get the noodles made). Someone (Marvin Kilmer?) brought a tasty beef barbecue. There were many many cookies of many many varieties, and cakes and sweet treats and cheese balls and pickles and olives and lots of stuff to drink. We went completely through 3 full punchbowls of the infamous orange stuff (somebody actually asked me for the recipe!), and a few brave souls ventured into the basement for beer.

Books were returned, but few were borrowed this year. Ann did succeed in foisting off some extras from her box o' duplicates and discards, thus making room for a few more in the new year. Some great conversations were enjoyed, along with all the food and drink.

And a good time was had by all.

Quote of the Month

"The future is going to be boring. The suburbanisation of the planet will continue, and the suburbanisation of the soul will follow soon after."

J. G. Ballard

Books

Light

By M. John Harrison
reviewed by David Brody

What is this "New Weird" thing anyway? I can't answer that, but China Miéville has a partial answer in the December *Locus*, so go read that. All I know is that if the result of this imperfect act of naming is writing as darned good as Miéville, Alistair Reynolds and M. John Harrison then label, categorize, generalize and specify as much as you want.

Of course, by now we know that Harrison is about as good as it gets. As a latecomer to the British New Wave of the 60's he managed, very quickly, to redefine fantasy with his Viriconium stories and recreate space opera with *The Centauri Device*. With *Light*, a self-admitted attempt to prove that he is still as good as ever, he leads the charge of young energetic British writers who may actually be creating a movement in the form of the New Weird.

But, whether you call a movement New Wave, New Weird or Cyberpunk, all it's ever meant is an attempt to prove that SF and Fantasy can be as literate and polished as any kind of writing. And I think that the point has been proven. In fact, from Ballard to Gibson to Miéville, I think the best writing anywhere in the last forty years or so has been in SF and Fantasy.

Alas, as Ted Sturgeon said "ninety percent of everything is crap", and that remains as true in SF as with anything else: The epic overwhelms the profound, and just plain bad writing keeps at bay the possibility of entertainment with depth. *Light*, firmly planted in that other ten percent, manages to be epic, entertaining and (God forbid) even profound.

Light has three central characters with very separate but strangely related stories.

Michael Kearny is a deeply troubled physicist in present day England whose work will lead to the discovery of a means of travel to the stars. He has a particularly nasty hobby that I won't give away because it's a nifty surprise delivered by Harrison right on page two. He is pursued by a strange, possibly alien, being called the Shrander.

The other two protagonists exist in a distant future made possible by Kearney's discovery. They live in the glow of a vast impenetrable cloud of gas and light (hence the title) which has driven countless generations of humans and others to unsuccessfully attempt exploration of its core.

Seria Mau Genlicher is the human heart of a stolen warship made