

ALEXIAD

(ΑΛΕΞΙΑΣ)

\$2.00

This morning the cold made me cut my walk far shorter than I like. As a result I lost my little game of trying to spot at least one of each different type of animal out and about. I saw birds but did not see any mammals other than other humans, not even a squirrel. I would have seen a squirrel had it not been too cold to sit on the steps until one appeared. In winter the only critters out and about are mammals and birds. In summer I can usually see insects, birds, and mammals. If I am lucky I will also see reptiles, crustaceans and sometimes even mollusks. Most of the birds I see at this time of the year are wrens, sparrows and crows. On the ground the crows waddle around awkwardly. In the air they are magnificent. I never tire of watching the way they can fold their wings and hover for a few seconds before landing. It is an incredible sight and never fails to make my heart lift. But the greatest recent thrill came on the way to church last Sunday when four deer came bounding across the road in front of us.

— Lisa

Table of Contents

Editorial	1
Reviewer's Notes	1
Eclipse News	2
"The Hildebrand Rarity"	3
In Memory of Digger	3
The Joy of High Tech	5
Six Degrees of Cleopatra	3
Worldcon News	8
Book Reviews	
JTM Barden, <i>Echoes</i>	4
JTM Barden, <i>Shades</i>	4
JTM Barden, <i>Speed</i>	4
JTM Turtledove, <i>Salamis</i>	4
JTM Macintyre, <i>Agent Sonya</i>	5
JTM Viesturs/Roberts, <i>No Shortcuts to the Top</i>	4
TV Reviews	
TW <i>Away</i>	8
TW <i>The Queen's Gambit</i>	8
Random Jottings	2
Letters	9
Richard A. Dengrove, Tom Feller, Robert S. Kennedy, Timothy Lane, Lloyd Penney, AL du Pisani, George W. Price, John Purcell, Darrell Schweitzer, Taras Wolansky	
Comments are by JTM or LTM	
Trivia:	14
Art:	
Sheryl Birkhead	9
Alexis A. Gilliland	5
Trinlay Khadro	2
Marc Schirmeister	3, 4, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13

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Reviewer's Notes

This has been a year of cancellations. I am beginning to wonder if the concept of conventions will survive such a long lapse. The first convention was a bunch of guys from New York going down to Philly to see some guys there, back in 1936. **One of those people is still alive**; centenarian eofan Bob Madle.

But do the congoers care any longer? When this shutdown began, "con" was more likely to be a corporate enterprise, where compensated actors were present but only on display. Are these entities more likely to survive than the fan-run con, where the guests mixed with the other members? It's not an inviting prospect.

Not to mention the other lacks of comprehension on display this year. There was a letter questioning the Saudi bid for Worldcon. Except it was issued two days before voting ended, and appealed to a governing body to disallow the bid. It doesn't work that way.

There was the discussion on one website by a congoer who was upset that the con didn't offer the items he wanted. It was possible to volunteer, or to even give such events on his own. That says something, but I'm not sure what.

The field has shifted. It's been my opinion for some time that this is the result of the consolidation of publishers. The corporate entity of which the publisher is a part is run by people who want to see recognized literary people publish. They buy the sort of novels they liked in college. And so we get SF novels that aren't all that distinguishable from the run of "lit'ry" fiction.

The alternative is small-press and even Web publication. As someone who has published several books that latter way, I can't entirely object. But these enterprises tend to be niche. (Gay Navy SEAL romances, for example.) The publicity is word-of-mouth, the editing is "what's that?"

Perhaps I'm too pushed into my own corner.

It seems whenever I like something it dies shortly thereafter. Thus with some trepidation I recommend Travis Hanson's "Life of the Party". This recounts (mostly) the travails of a D&D adventure group. (Or as the Boss of the Dungeon calls them, "murder hobos".) They run into too much or too little loot, have problems with spell book apps taking time to update, boasting about heroisms and being upstaged, and so on. With the occasional breaking of the fourth wall; the characters berating the DM for various perceived unfairnesses, or being assailed by the snacks their players bring.

There is a rich and varied supporting cast, gnomes who seem to be selling everything, dragons having financial issues, and such one-offs as the wild cyclopotamus. Not to mention some visitors from one of Hanson's likes: Gandalf being pursued by fans wanting autographs, Saruman being called on the palantir to buy solar panels, and the Eye being psychoanalyzed for having had issues with stolen jewelry . . .

<https://www.beanleafpress.com>

— Joe

RANDOM JOTTINGS

by Joe



Buy my books. (All available on Amazon.com for quite reasonable prices, except the Hugo-nominated *Heinlein's Children*, which can be bought directly from George Price for a reasonable sum.)

https://www.amazon.com/-/e/B01BMIC4MU?ref=pe_1724030_132998070

— Advt.

The voyage of the USCGC *Polar Star* to McMurdo Sound has been canceled, due to the effects of the coronavirus and the decrepit state of the ship. (There had been a fire in the incinerator room.)

This cancellation of the resupply voyage will put a further crimp in the U.S. Antarctic presence, which is already constrained by the coronavirus. They might be welcoming The Thing from Another World.

And continuing in the cancellation theme, the 2021 Holmes, Doyle, & Friends Sherlockian meeting in Dayton, Ohio has been canceled. They doubted that an effective vaccine would be available before April, and the meeting is in March. (Its predecessor, the SH/ACD Symposium, had originally been in January. Brrr.)

Japanese director Takahiro Miki is bringing out an movie version of *The Door Into Summer* (NHOL G.131; 1957), starring popular actor Kento Yamazaki. The release date is the nineteenth day of the second month of the third year of Reiwa (February 19, 2021).

Takahiro Miki
<https://www.imdb.com/name/nm3410783/>

The Door Into Summer
<https://natsu-eno-tobira.com/>

I hope you can read Japanese.

J. Michael Straczynski has announced that next year will see the publication of Harlan Ellison's famous lost anthology *The Last Dangerous Visions* — less the stories withdrawn and published elsewhere, with new diverse writers, and with a space held open for

someone emerging as a significant voice.

This could have problems. Does he even have the rights to the stories?

It now appears that one James Dutton has written and is trying to sell *Rudbek of Rudbek*, a sequel to *Citizen of the Galaxy* (NHOL G.134). Whatever will the Heinlein Estate say?

Shalmirane is being demolished!

That is, the famous Arecibo Observatory in Puerto Rico is being demolished after the collapse of the structure. Now we *have* to go to the Moon, so we can build a new one on the far side.

Congratulations to **Les Johnson** for receiving the Phoenix Award, for the pro who has done the most for Southern Fandom, at this year's DeepSouthCon.

“You take the blue pill — the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill — you go to Antarctica and I show you how deep down the wreck is.” Watching Morpheus (well, Lawrence Fishburne) introduce the History Channel's *History's Greatest Mysteries* provokes strange emotions.

As when, for example, they cover the attempt by the *S A Agulhas II* to send a remote controlled submarine down to find and photograph the wreck of the *Endurance*. This was in February of 2019. The probe submersible kept on getting lost under the pack and the photographic drone was damaged by water pressure, so they were out of luck.

History's Greatest Mysteries
<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt11947238/>

History's Greatest Mysteries:
The Hunt for Shackleton's Ice Ship
<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt13432948/>

A year that sees the death of Dame Diana Rigg and Sir **Sean Connery** is a year that isn't worth it.

December 7 marked the 79th anniversary of Pearl Harbor. I paused to remember all the veterans and especially Chief Water Tender Peter Tomich. Greater love hath no man than to lay down his life for another.

— Lisa

OBITS

Pro and fan writer **Richard A. Lupoff** died on **October 22, 2020**. Dick Lupoff was editor of the Hugo-winning fanzine *Xero* (his wife Pat was the other one), the author of such weird fiction as *Sacred Locomotive Flies* (1971), *Into*

the Aether (1974), and “With the Bentfin Boomer Boys on Little Old New Alabama” (*Again, Dangerous Visions* (1973)), and such valuable nonfiction work as *All In Color for a Dime* (1970) and *Edgar Rice Burroughs, Master of Adventure* (1968, 2005). Born in 1935, he had been a fan since 1952, being a founder of the fan club the Fanoclasts. He is survived by his three children.

Author and editor **Ben Bova** died **November 29, 2020** from COVID-related pneumonia. Born November 8, 1932, Bova began his career as a technical writer for Project Vanguard, the early satellite-launching program. In the sixties he began writing technological-related nonfiction and science fiction, and in 1972 he succeeded John W. Campbell as editor of *Analog*, remaining there for six years.

Among his other endeavors was as science advisor for *The Starlost*, an experience recounted only slightly fictionalized in his *The Starcrossed* (1975). He also served as editor of *OMNI*, and wrote a total of 124 books.

MONARCHICAL NEWS

It looks like Nicholas Medforth-Mills, that is **Prince Nicholas of Romania**, is back in the succession. Moreover, he is a father; **Princess Maria Alexandra of Romania** was born in Bucharest on **November 7, 2020**.

YOU'RE SO VAIN
by Joe

There will be a solar eclipse on **December 14**, visible in Arucania Region, Los Ríos Region, and Bio Bio Region of Chile and the Northern Patagonia Region of Argentina. Maximum totality will be 130 seconds, visible at 40° 18' S. 67° 54' W. in Argentina. The eclipse is part of Saros 142, which began April 17, 1624 and will end June 5, 2904.

There will be two solar eclipses in 2021. The first will be an annular eclipse, on **June 10, 2021**, visible in Ontario, Quebec, the Canadian Northern territories, Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland), and the Far Eastern Province of Russia. The path will also pass over the North Pole. Maximum annularity will be in Greenland, and will last 3 minutes 51 seconds. The eclipse is part of Saros 147, which began October 12, 1624 and will end February 24, 3049.

The second will be a total eclipse, on **December 4, 2021**, visible in East Antarctica, from the Ronne Ice Shelf to Marie Byrd Land. The path will be passing above the Pole and thus will run from East to West, instead of from West to East as most eclipses do. The maximum totality will be 1 minute 54 seconds, visible at 76° 46' S 46° 12' W, on the Ronne Ice Shelf. The eclipse is part of Saros 152, which began on July 26, 1805 and will end on August 20, 3049.

NASA Eclipse website:
<https://eclipse.gsfc.nasa.gov/eclipse.html>

Other useful eclipse websites:
<http://www.hermit.org/Eclipse>

<http://www.eclipse.org.uk/>

SIX DEGREES OF CLEOPATRA
 by Joe

Is there some rule that the Serpent of the Nile has to be played by a good Jewish girl? First Theodosia Goodman/Theda Bara, then Elizabeth Taylor (so she converted), and now Gal Gadot.
 Therefore, we have to do a Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon among them.

Gal Gadot has a Theda Bara Number of 4
 Gal Gadot was in *Fast Five* with Vin Diesel
 Vin Diesel was in *Awakenings* with Ruth Nelson
 Ruth Nelson was in *Wilson* with Thurston Hall
 Thurston Hall was in *Cleopatra* with Theda Bara

Elizabeth Taylor has a Theda Bara Number of 2
 Elizabeth Taylor was in *A Place In the Sun* with Herbert Heyes
 Herbert Heyes was in *Under Two Flags* with Theda Bara

Elizabeth Taylor has a Gal Gadot Number of 3
 Elizabeth Taylor was in *Rhapsody* with Madge Blake
 Madge Blake was in *Follow Me, Boys!* with Kurt Russell
 Kurt Russell was in *Furious 7* with Gal Gadot

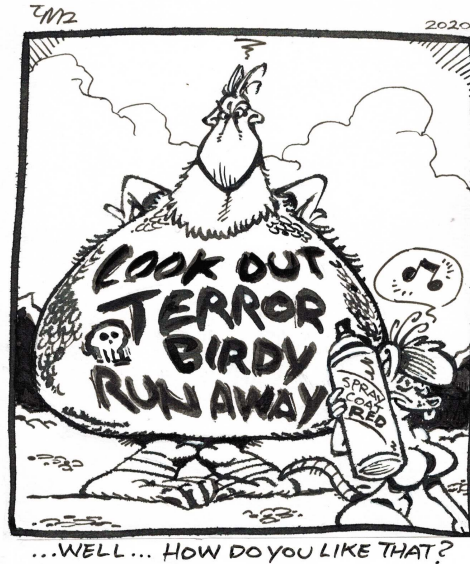
IN MEMORY OF DIGGER
 by Lisa

At the Nearly New thrift store in the mall basement I encounter a Doberman Christmas ornament. I am tempted to buy it in the memory of the Doberman I once shared my life with. He was not my dog but belonged to the neighbors. It was I who usually saw to it, though, that he got some exercise every day. He spoiled me for lesser dogs. The ornament, however, is not all that true to life. Its eyes do not show the keen intelligence which marked the eyes of Digger, the Doberman or the playfulness so much a part of him. Not until Mr. Chunk came along was I to see the same keen intelligence in an animal's eyes.

FISH STORY

Commentary by Joseph T Major on
 "The Hildebrand Rarity"
 by Ian Fleming
 (1960; *Playboy*, March 1960)

As a kid, Sesame Street taught me the value of education, empathy, and kindness.
 But Bugs Bunny taught me that revenge on my enemies must be quick, clever, and brutal.



An abused wife, married to a rich oafish brute, endures humiliation and chastisement. Finally, she finds the strength to kill him, in a brutal and fitting fashion. Fortunately, she is spared having to stand trial, because the death scene has been changed to look like an accident.

This, surprisingly, is a James Bond story. Fleming was being "experimental" at the end of the fifties, and wrote a few stories where Bond is an onlooker, or meets a powerful woman, or is otherwise not the principal actor. This is one of them. It is collected in the book *For Your Eyes Only* (1960), and was published in *Playboy*, which evidently was glad to get any Bond story, even one like this. Almost uniquely, it is the only Fleming Bond story which has not been used as the title or basis for a movie.

It begins with Bond swimming off the coast of an island in the Seychelles. He is hunting a sting ray. Finally, he harpoons his target, and drags it ashore, staying carefully away from its tail. Not only is the tail poisonous, it can be made into a very nasty whip. These are known to be used as wife-chasteners, and have been banned, which seems to have restrained the practice.

Then Bond's host, a man from a rich family there, comes down and arranged to have the ray properly killed. He also has an offer for Bond; there is a rich American on a plush yacht who wants to search for fish, and wants local aid.

This is not a spy mission, though it's the aftermath of one. Bond is there investigating the Seychelles as a potential naval base. There is some concern about Communism. (But none about France-Albert René, who in 1977 would become President, and rule so oddly that a coup

attempt was funded by persons unknown, to be carried out by Michael "Mad Mike" Hoare, which failed because a dumb mercenary tried to declare his AK-47 at customs.)

Bond is on vacation now. He takes up the offer.

Then he might have regretted it. The yacht is the MV *Wavekrest*, owned by millionaire hotelier Milton Krest. Krest is not a very likeable man. He openly boasts of his wealth, insults everyone around, and most significantly seems to have utterly intimidated his trophy wife, Elizabeth, a former model and receptionist, known as "Liz". (When we first see Liz she seems naked, but she is suntanned and wearing a very small bikini of the same color as her skin.)

Krest continues to boast, explaining how he can afford this ship and trip. The ship is actually owned by a foundation, and sails on biological specimen collecting expeditions. Most of these seem to consist of Krest offering bribes to local officials to let him have specimens. And it's all at the American taxpayer's expense.

Some specimens aren't quite for the people he's working for. He has one of those stingray-tail whips, and boasts that he has used it on Liz. When Bond points out that having, much less using, one of those whips is illegal, Krest says that it is legal in the USA, and they are on American territory.

This particular trip is to catch a rare (indeed, only one has been ever found so far) fish called "The Hildebrand Rarity", after the discoverer. The Hildebrand Rarity is described as a rare type of squirrel-fish (*Holocentrinae*).

After an unpleasant voyage, since the sheer luxury of the yacht is more than overborn by the obnoxiousness of the host, the *Wavekrest* arrives at the island where the Hildebrand Rarity was seen. Krest has a simple and economical idea for catching the fish; when they find one, he will spread poison over the water there, and collect the Hildebrand Rarity, ignoring the devastation left.

Bond is the one who spots one, and tells Krest, but tries to foil his scheme. It doesn't work. Krest puts the fish in a jar with preservative, and the *Wavekrest* sets off for port.

That night, Krest gets drunker than usual, berates Bond and his friend, threatens to have them thrown overboard if they give him any trouble, and when Liz speaks up he promises her a whipping. They all go to bed. Bond is sleeping in a hammock out on the main deck, Krest in another on an upper deck of the superstructure.

In the middle of the night, Bond is awakened by a shout, followed by sounds of gagging. By the time he gets there Krest is dead. The Hildebrand Rarity has been shoved into his mouth and he has strangled.

No one else (except the killer) has heard. Bond decides to avoid trouble. He throws the body over the side and makes it look like a railing line broke. He has wondered why Liz Krest hadn't done that already; all she would

have had to do by way of defense would be to present the whip. That done, he goes back to his hammock and tries to get some sleep.

In the morning, the crew notice that their employer has gone. A discussion ensues and they continue, figuring that Krest is probably dead. Liz Krest offers Bond a cruise on the *Wavekrest*, and after a little thought, he accepts.

Somehow, one doesn't think of "James Bond" and "female empowerment" being associated. But, as Sir Kingsley Amis pointed out in *The James Bond Dossier* (1965), the "Bond-girl" is generally assertive and strong. (Though it doesn't help that the chapter discussing this is titled "Beautiful Firm Breasts".) To take one blatant example, in the novel *Doctor No* (1958), Honeychile Rider doesn't panic when the crabs crawl over her, she manages to break free of her bonds, and almost coshes Bond. And afterwards, she entertains him quite Bond-style, in the (still-livable) basement of her house. This contrasts with the scene in the movie where Honey Rider is tied down and about to drown when Bond rescues her.

Bond's concern about Liz Krest is also striking. He sees her as a woman who was seduced into an unpleasant marriage. ("Quantum of Solace" (*Cosmopolitan*, May 1959), another story in *For Your Eyes Only*, is about the consequences of an unfortunate marriage.)

The characterization of Krest seems at first to be particularly biased, as if setting him up as a melodramatic bad guy. He is all of a piece, as it were; he treats other people as things. It seems he went to a lot of effort to earn his untimely and unpleasant demise.

The story also has a self-reflection that is uncommon. In a striking scene of vivid and moving description, Bond sees the mass deaths of the fish caused by Krest's poison and is quite rightly appalled. (This would be even more appalling these days, what with concern about the environment.) Then, he realizes he has a problem with his status for making such an observation, since Krest has only killed fish, while he kills men. (Rather like Lucas Trask's self-revelation in *Space Viking*: "Elaine came to him, while he was resting. She looked at him in horror, and he tried to hide his face from her, and then realized that he was trying to hide it from himself.")

INTO THE AETHER

Review by Joseph T Major of

SHADES

(Aether Chronicles Book 1)

(2020; ISBN 979-8676951856; \$12.99;

Kindle; \$0.99)

ECHOES

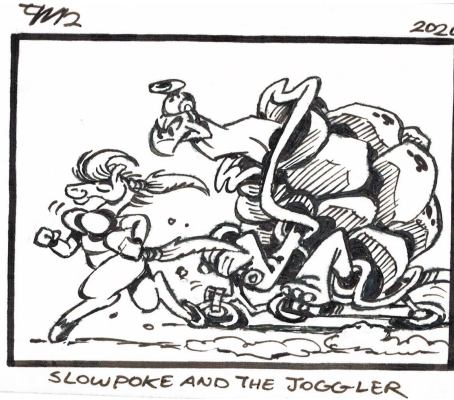
(Aether Chronicles Book 2)

(2020; ISBN 979-8692663108; \$12.99;

Kindle; \$2.99)

SPEED

(Aether Chronicles Book 3)
(2020; ISBN 979-8551701569; \$12.99;
Kindle; \$2.99)
by Abi Barden



Amethyst Forester is in a thriving technological and scientific field; the study and employment of aether, the substance that surrounds us and penetrates us. It binds the world together.

And indeed, this story works on several levels. It's a scientific investigation about a different science, a scendifiction straight off the pages of Gernsback's *Amazing Stories*. It's a historical novel of the struggles of a woman trying to assert herself in a society that undervalues her. It's a steampunk adventure, with high politics and personal crises. And it's a romance; not the stock plot of the beautiful but blank woman filling the secret need of the powerful man, either.

Amethyst is trying to realize the work of her mentor, who died in one of his experiments, and left her half his house. The other half goes to an investor, who we'll call by his last name of "Maker", because Barden has utterly mixed up the structure of titles.

Indeed, so many of the characters are noble, in title if not in personality, that the book seems to be a diversion from the pages of *Debrett's*. Including the enigmatic seemed-to-be antagonist, who is one of the richest men in England, father-in-law of Maker, and basically strange.

Add to this mix such political pressures as New Jacobins (this movement existed in our time-line too, but they had to back the Crown Princess of Bavaria, which caused problems), the Fenians, and the general low-lives of London. Amethyst has to step carefully.

And did I mention that Maker's wife is a shrew, a bigot, a 22-karat bitch, and someone with a terrible secret? In Victorian society his having a mistress would be quite understandable; but he has too much honor and decency to do so.

The technology seems out of *The Wild Wild West* and for what it's worth President Grant makes a visit. In an aether-powered dirigible, no less. Where are James West and Artemus Gordon? They're needed.

Amethyst is a well-drawn character, capable

of carrying the plot. She struggles with her society, devotes herself to her research, and has painful feelings for those she loves and cannot have. Also, she has a cat — one that has been fitted with a prosthesis she made herself.

But the last book ends with a shocking plot twist and cliffhanger, which means that there will be more revelations and danger when this is . . . **To Be Continued.**

THE BRONZE GOD OF RHODES

Review by Joseph T Major of

SALAMIS

by Harry Turtledove

(2020; CAEZIK SF & Fantasy;

ISBN 978-1647100070; \$16.99;

CAEZIK SF & Fantasy (Kindle); \$9.99)

An Hellenic Traders Novel

Menedemos and Sostratos are known by important people. Not that in their era being known by important people is entirely desirable. As when they get grilled by the Ptolemaios himself, when the *Aphrodite* is in Alexandria after bringing olive oil from Rhodes. They find themselves "voluntarily" carrying weapons to the Ptolemaic army near Salamis in Cyprus. (Were you thinking of someplace else?)

As you know, Bob, while preparing a statue of the Demetrios, Chares of Lindhos overheard the general talking about the terrain around Salamis, and deduced that they weren't talking about Athens. He wisely stayed away from there; Menedemos, Sostratos, and the crew of the *Aphrodite* didn't have a choice, though they did escape the Ptolemaic loss unscathed, and returned to Rhodes with their cargo of weapons, much to the advantage of Chares and his fellow catapult crew.

Wherein other problems emerge. Whilst Sostratos casually hunts down loose women, Menedemos likes one in particular. His father's second wife. Who has just had a baby. (As Antigone, Eteokles, Polynikes, and Ismene said to Oidipous, "Mother always liked you best!")

As they shuttle between Alexandria and Rhodes, the wars of the Diadochi began to build, and the portrayal of that era is to be noted. The past is a different world, and telling a story set then requires as much world building as telling a futuristic or fantastic novel. The next few months will be very familiar to those who remember *The Bronze God of Rhodes* (1961; reviewed in *Alexiad* V. 13 #6). Chaire!

FEAR AND LOATHING ON CHOMOLUNGMA

Review by Joseph T Major of

NO SHORTCUTS TO THE TOP: Climbing the World's 14 Highest Peaks

by Ed Viesturs with David Roberts

(2006; Broadway Books;

ISBN 978-0767924702; \$23.95;

Broadway Books (Kindle); \$6.99)

<https://www.edviesturs.com/>

When in the latest reboot Shazam revealed himself to Superman on the flanks of Mount Everest, he was risking his life. Well, that of Billy Batson, his real self. There are several ways to die at 8000 meters, most of them agonizing and unpleasant and the rest worse.

American climber Ed Viesturs took on a suicidal mission and lived. There are fourteen mountains in the world that are higher than 8000 meters above sea level. The legendary mountaineering superman Reinhold Messner was the first to climb all of them, and without supplemental oxygen, either. Ed was twelfth, and the first American to do so.

This is the story of his climbs and his life.

Ed got started reading Robert Lansing's *Endurance*, but got diverted into mountain climbing. On the side he got a degree as a veterinarian, a job as a carpenter, some girlfriends (including one romantic tryst at altitude), a wife, and three children.

His first climb was not quite a success. It seems that Shishapangma, the lowest of the 8000 meter mountains, has two summits, and like the hapless Binder of *The Ascent of Rum Doodle* (1956), he found himself on the lower one, with a remarkably hazardous passage to the higher one. Later on, when he finally reached the real top, he did so by sliding along the ridge between the two peaks.

The problem, as always, is paying for things. Climbers tend to work seasonal jobs for long hours and live economically in order to save their money for gear. Ed went so far as to live in a basement he described as a dungeon. However, as he racked up ascents he managed to figure out how to get sponsorship (the cold calls didn't work), which meant he could work doing what he loved.

Or other things, as taking part in a documentary on climbing Everest. The hardest part was getting the IMAX camera up the peak. The stabilization gear is extremely bulky and heavy.

Climbing is a very fraternal enterprise, and Ed talks about several familiar people. One being Jon Krakauer, author of *Into Thin Air* (1997), and Ed and Jon were both on Everest during that disaster. Ed discusses the problem in recounting the actions of the late Anatoli Boukreev, a significant figure in those events.

There is some discussion of the history. One of those books that Ed read was Maurice Herzog's *Annapurna* (1951, 1952). The French expedition had set out to climb Dhaulagiri but the maps were so bad they couldn't find it. The summiters lost their toes to frostbite and Herzog also lost most of his fingers after putting down his gloves and having them slide off. Later, it came out that Herzog had not been the best of expedition leaders.

One item that recurs is those deaths. If you're a climber, someone you know will die young on a mountain, maybe not even you. Ed touches on several deaths, tragic and sad. Instead of those morality problems of trolley

cars and switching, perhaps the morals teachers should discuss a real-life incident such as having to cut the rope on which your climbing partner is hanging so both of you don't die.

One of the issues with Everest is that it is simply not possible to bring down the bodies of the dead. Getting down alive is hard enough in itself, and Everest is not the worst of such places. K2 is worse and there are others.

Even when death is not an issue there are problems. Ed describes how his veterinary training enabled him to diagnose and nearly treat a dying fellow climber, who coughed up most of his throat lining and lived. Or the French climber who managed to get back to base in spite of having a compound fracture of the arm. And then there's freezing to consider. Billy should have turned back to Shazam as quickly as possible.

Ed stated he decided to cut back on climbing after getting the fourteen peaks. There is a lot more he could have done: the Seven Summits (highest peak on every continent, doing seven of nine), the Three Poles (North Pole, South Pole, and Everest), and the Explorers Grand Slam (the Seven Summits and the Three Poles).

BRITISH GOLD

Review by Joseph T Major of

AGENT SONYA:

Moscow's Most Daring Wartime Spy

by Ben Macintyre

(2020; Crown;

ISBN 978-0593136300; \$28.00;

Crown (Kindle); \$13.99)

Ursula Kuczynski came from a Yekke — German Jewish — family. She could be assumed not to have much affection for the Nazis. Nevertheless, some might find her becoming an officer of the GRU to be something of an extreme reaction to the problem. And she came after Agent KARL (i.e. Whittaker Chambers) defected, which cut off that line of inquiry.

And she had a life path which would seem to make her a prime candidate for being unmasked as a Trotskyite-Zinovievite agent of foreign intelligence services and given the supreme measure of punishment, having gone from Germany to Britain, thence to China. Yet somehow she escaped the fate that had been dealt out to many in that service, from General Berzin the Director on down.

Then she settled down in Britain, married an Englishman, and lived to all appearances a conventional life. The perfect agent-runner, which is to say. She ran Klaus Fuchs, and passed on his intelligence to the Aquarium.

Slowly it began to come apart. She fell under suspicion, but nothing definite, and she survived questioning by Jim Skardon. But Fuchs began to talk . . . and in 1950 Ursula uprooted herself and fled to East Germany. She became a Party activist and a writer. She outlived the country, dying in 2000.

"It's a ruble to get in, but two to get out." Whittaker Chambers had those two rubles, but he realized that he could not endure being in.

Pyotr Popov did not have the the two rubles, and he paid for his leaving in an agonizing fashion. Ursula chose neither one route nor the other. She seemed never to have regretted her choices.

The ideal spy runner is like a serial killer; an ordinary person who never makes trouble. Harry Gold (GOOSE) was the nerdy guy down the street who just wants to be helpful (cf. *The Invisible Harry Gold* (2010; reviewed in *Alexiad* V. 10 #2)). William Fisher ("Colonel Abel", cf. *Abel: The True Story of the Spy They Traded for Gary Powers* (2015)) was just another artist. The difference was that Ursula managed to get away.

The Joy of High Tech by Rodford Edmiston



Being the occasionally interesting ramblings of a major-league technophile.

Please note that while I am an engineer (BSCE) and do my research, I am not a professional in this field. Do not take anything here as gospel; check the facts I give. If you find a mistake, please let me know about it.

Why Did the Hindenburg Burn?

Airships were already on the way out before the disaster at the Lakehurst Naval Station, near Manchester Township, New Jersey. Though they were much faster than steamships, they were slower than airplanes. They were also unpressurized. Now, airplanes from that era were also unpressurized — with a few exceptions — but designers saw the future coming and airplanes were easier than airships to pressurize. Part of the problem was the added weight required to pressurize at least the passenger volumes. Keeping the weight low was important to both types of craft, but airships were especially sensitive to this concern. Pressurization of passenger aircraft was coming, for several reasons. If the Second World War hadn't intervened, there could have been routine transoceanic flights of pressurized passenger airplanes by 1940.

Note that even during the Second World War most airplanes were unpressurized. In fact, there was a huge amount of work done by the participants in that conflict to find oxygen

masks which would work with the wide variety of face sizes and shapes possessed by aircrew. (Harking back to something from a previous JOHT.) Still, the way to get long range in an airplane is to fly very high. The energy cost of climbing into the thinner air was more than recovered on long flights by the reduction in drag during cruise. Above a certain altitude supplemental oxygen just isn't enough. So pressurized aircraft were the obvious improvement needed for future aviation.

Not that airships couldn't do high altitude. During the First World War there were times when German Zeppelin bombers over Great Britain were immune from artillery and the airplanes sent against them. The Height Climbers and the later Super Height Climbers (two sequential classes of Zeppelin bombers lightened and otherwise optimized for high-altitude operation) had crew dressed in electrically heated flight suits and supplied with supplemental oxygen. This created great hardships for the airship crews — the technologies were very primitive compared to what became available just a few years later — but the discomfort and inconvenience were minor when compared to getting shot down. This concern was presumably not something airship passengers would need to put up with, of course.

Because of the difficulties of bringing the fight to the enemy with artillery and early airplanes during the Airship bombing raids of the Great War, many people — including Sir H. Rider Haggard — advocated for Britain to build its own airship fleet. These would be dedicated to hunting down and destroying the German airships, since artillery and airplanes — though only early on in the conflict for the latter — could not reach the altitude where the Zeppelins (after a few low-altitude attacks) operated. (In fact, the German airships could outclimb the crude airplanes of the day, and some were faster horizontally than the early British interceptors; at least at high altitude.) However, technology soon led to improved airplane interceptors. Even with the increased operational height of the later Zeppelin bombers, the airplanes eventually rose to the challenge.

Early on, the most common cause for the loss of an airship were operational mistakes. (This also applied to the early airplanes, a few years later.) People learned, and flights became safer. Then came the Great War, during which those attacked by airships (most of the attacking being done by German Naval Zeppelins) devoted considerable resources to developing ways to destroy them. When enemy action was not a consideration the two main causes of airship losses were structural failure and weather. Often, running into bad weather led to structural failure. Airships were large, so they caught a lot of wind, and they had to be built light, which reduced strength. (One reason so many non-German, post-war rigid airships — such as the USS *Macon* (ZRS-

5) — failed was that many were based on the lightweight height-climbers, which were even more fragile than most Zeppelins.) As design and construction methods and materials improved pure structural failure became a rarity. However, weather continued to be a problem. German Zeppelin captains were trained to recognize hazardous weather conditions and avoid them. Which is one reason those airships had such a good overall safety record in their years of passenger service.

Speaking of materials, note that during the First World War the Germans had *two* rigid airship programs; one by the Army and one by the Navy. The smaller program of the German Army used craft built by the Schütte-Lanz Company, rather than by Zeppelin. The Schütte-Lanz airships used glued, laminated wood, including plywood, for their main structural material. The Navy program used Zeppelins with duralumin (aka duraluminum, duraluminium, duralum, durallium, or dural; a series of strong, light aluminum-copper alloys, today considered obsolete) for their structures.

Early Zeppelins generally had ceilings of under 2000 meters. The first German airship bombing raids against Britain were usually made from even lower altitudes, usually below a thousand meters. Mostly this low altitude was used to improve accuracy. The first Zeppelin bombing raid on London was made from about 4000 meters. Note that the limits of altitude and the time which airships could spend at altitude were generally determined by the endurance of the crew. That is, going higher and staying higher put a huge amount of stress on the humans due to the thin, cold air.

After the first downing of a Zeppelin by a British airplane on September 2, 1916, the Germans developed the Height Climbers. (Note that "Height Climber" and "Super Height Climber" were British designations. The Germans used model numbers.) These routinely operated at altitudes of 6000 meters, at over 110 kilometers per hour. Trying to intercept these meant that British airplane crews fought oxygen deprivation and extreme cold, as well as the enemy. The thin air stole engine power. The cold led to snapped oil lines, congealed oil, frozen radiators, and cracked windows. The reduction in oxygen intake led to mental and physical impairment of the pilots, which made dealing with anything — especially an emergency — more difficult.

For a time, these higher-flying Zeppelins proved immune from interception, except when returning to base. As they descended to approach their airfields in Germany, many were shot down by French planes, and British planes based in France. The Zeppelin captains quickly learned to maintain altitude until over their bases, where they could be defended by German airplanes and ground artillery. Which added to the strain on the crews.

One such airship waited too long. The rising Sun warmed the hydrogen and the Zeppelin shot up to 7460 meters. Much of the crew lost consciousness, and if those remaining functional

hadn't been able to force the craft to a lower altitude when they did, all might have died. The unconscious crew eventually revived and the frozen engines were restarted, but the ship had to make a forced landing in central Germany. This remains the altitude record for a rigid airship. As well as the record for the most time spent above 6060 meters by an airship with crew members actually surviving.

The British responded to the higher-altitude bombing raids by dressing pilots more warmly and taking measures to protect their aircraft against the cold. This included using airplanes with air cooled engines. As far as I have been able to determine, they did not provide supplemental oxygen. Since their pilots spent much less time above 4800 meters they were much less affected than German airship crews, who were spending tens of hours "up there." However, they *were* up there, and the British were desperately trying to reach them.

The Germans dealt with the problem of the effects of thin air by providing tanks of supplemental oxygen for their aircrews. However, the gas was usually contaminated by things such as pump oil (including glycerine) which caused days of side effects after the airships returned from their high-altitude missions. Of course, some of those physiological effects were purely due to spending so much time at high altitude. (Mountain climbers knew about "altitude sickness." Did no-one think to consult them?)

Passenger airships stayed low enough that those on board didn't need pressurization or oxygen supplementation. However, while having a good turn of speed when compared to steamships or even steam locomotives, they were slower than passenger airplanes (which, well into the Forties, were also mostly limited to lower altitudes). Neither class of passenger aircraft from that era would normally go above storms. Still, Zeppelin commanders were trained to avoid storms, even if that meant taking a longer route. For the most part this worked well. They could afford the extra time for this due to their much greater endurance.

In many ways the *Hindenburg* (German airship LZ-129) and similar craft served the same purpose as the later Concorde. They were luxurious, intended to replicate the feel and style of upper class steamship accommodations, and intended mainly for the wealthy. There was no steerage class on airships. The *Hindenburg* actually had a lounge, with a custom piano made largely of aluminum. There was even a smoking room, with an airlock. Outside air was pumped into the room, keeping it at a higher than ambient pressure, so that hydrogen couldn't enter. The airship's sole cigarette/cigar lighter, an electric one, was in this room, on a chain. This room was also the location of the bar.

There, by the way, you have indirectly the reason why the *Hindenburg* fire was so catastrophic. The airship was originally intended to use helium. However, then as now the US was the main source of helium (extracted from natural gas wells in some parts of the country)

and a 1927 Act of Congress forbade its export. So the *Hindenburg* instead used hydrogen, like the bomber airships of the Great War. Hydrogen is not hard to acquire, and can be made through such chemical operations as reacting iron filings with acid. This flammable gas provided slightly more lift than inert Helium, but greatly increased the risk.

Then there was the fabric coating used on most airships and many airplanes of the time.

Aircraft dope is a special type of paint. It bonds with fabric, then shrinks as it cures. This pulls the outer skin of an aircraft taut, making it strong and smoothing the surface. The dope also protects the fabric from weather and other sources of potential damage, such as gnawing insects or light impacts. Today, all aircraft dope (which is not only used on the old aircraft which are still around; there are some of current manufacture which are made with fabric coverings) is safe once it cures and the highly flammable solvents evaporate. However back then the shiny appearance of airship hulls (the silver reflecting sunlight to reduce heating, which could cause the lifting gas to expand and change the craft's buoyancy) was accomplished by adding powdered aluminum to the dope.

Powdered aluminum is very flammable. When combined chemically with oxygen it releases a huge amount of energy. It is one of the major components in traditional thermite. It is also used in some solid rocket propellants, such as the boosters for the Space Transportation System. The dope used on the *Hindenburg* and several other Zeppelins of that era had an aluminum-containing dope which also had a small proportion of iron oxide, in a cellulose acetate butyrate binder. The cured dope resembled in general chemical makeup modern, aluminum-based solid rocket propellants. Though there was too little iron oxide in airship dope to provide oxygen for combustion — as occurs in thermite — a trace of that substance is included in aluminum-burning solid rocket propellants as a catalyst. In the doped skin of the *Hindenburg*, once combustion started there would be plenty of oxygen available from the air.

A few years back, someone who had a piece of unburned fabric covering from the unlucky airship (souvenir seekers quickly took away anything small they could grab) volunteered a small portion of it for testing. When this was touched to a flame, it quickly ignited and burned very energetically. The Zeppelin company knew this dope was not only flammable but highly so, and was phasing it out. However, they hadn't recovered the *Hindenburg* yet. All it needed was a spark.

Early on, airships had many advantages over airplanes (which came along only after the airships had been around for a while). Besides greater altitude, they had the combined benefit of much greater endurance and range, plus greater stability. Despite the amount of gas needed to lift even a small weight they could also carry greater loads than

the early airplanes. Hence their use as bombers. By 1937, though, their only real advantages were endurance and stability. Airplanes had grown larger, faster and longer-legged. They could routinely cross great distances without refueling, and do it faster than the airships. The Zeppelins, though, were not in a hurry. They could spot a luxury liner on the ocean below and, if the Captain of the airship was so inclined, drop down to shout greetings or even exchange small packages via lines lowered from the airship.

On that last trip, the *Hindenburg* fought strong headwinds much of the way across the Atlantic. When it finally arrived in the US on May 6, 1937, debarking was further delayed by thunderstorms over and around the destination at Lakehurst. The airship flew over Manhattan Island to kill time and keep the passengers from getting antsy about the additional delay. With the weather at Lakehurst still iffy the huge airship then did a tour of the New Jersey seashore. When it finally arrived at Lakehurst fitful winds required multiple, sharp changes in direction to perform a high mooring. That was to be followed by winching the *Hindenburg* to the ground.

Unfortunately, the airship now also had trim troubles, and came in tail low. Water ballast was valved from the rear, and hydrogen from the forward lift cells. Some witnesses reported fluttering of the airship's fabric covering in front of the upper tail fin just before the fire. There was definitely hydrogen in the air from the forward venting. If that fluttering was caused by hydrogen leaking from a rear gas cell (there was later speculation that some plumbing or even a gas bag was sprung by those sharp turns) that would explain why the *Hindenburg* was tail heavy. Others reported a dim, blue discharge, also in front of the top fin, probably due to a buildup of static electricity.

Mooring lines were dropped and the ground crew pulled the great craft towards the mooring post. A light rain began to fall. People on board heard a muffled detonation from the rear of the ship. Flames were observed at the front and rear of the upper fin. Some witnesses later said they first saw flame elsewhere at the rear of the *Hindenburg*.

The fire spread rapidly. The aft end of the ship quickly lost lift and crashed into the ground. The duralumin frame bent and broke, which allowed the still-bouyant nose to swing upwards. This caused the forward part of the airship to act as a chimney, channeling much of the fire forward through the inside. From the first sighting of flame to the nose crashing into the ground took under 40 seconds.

Luckily, the ship was carrying only about half a full load of passengers. Thirteen of those thirty-six died, along with twenty-two of the sixty-one crew, with most of the rest in both groups being badly burned. An additional three passengers and six crew died of their injuries later. Some of those on the ground also died.

One survivor was saved by water ballast spilling onto him. Many of the survivors were

on the port side, which burned last, giving them time to let the ship settle before they jumped out windows. (Some of the fatalities were from people jumping or falling while still too high to survive the drop.) However, the main reason so many survived is that hydrogen burns quickly, and being so light flows upwards. The bulk of the fire burned out in about a minute and a half, most of it above the actual airship.

What started the fire? Sabotage was suspected at first, and is still held responsible by many. However, most of the investigators eventually decided on static discharge. Due to the way the outer covering was attached to the duralumin frame a charge could temporarily build up between those parts of the *Hindenburg*. If the rain wetted the mooring ropes — which were anchored to the frame and may have been impregnated with salt from the ocean crossing, increasing their conductivity when wet — the frame would have been grounded while the hull was still charged. The weather was certainly amenable to generating a static charge on an object in the air. However, the hull and frame were electrically connected (if not thoroughly) and the *Hindenburg* had flown many times through similar weather without incident. This included being struck by lightning!

The cause will likely never be determined for certain.

What is certain is that if the ship had been lifted by helium instead of hydrogen that the fire would likely have at most consumed the doped fabric and possibly a few other things, and deaths and injuries would have been greatly reduced.

The era of airships did not end instantly. Many — including the *Graf Zeppelin* — continued to fly for a while. The *Graf Zeppelin* (LZ-127) was the most successful airship in history, even making a trip around the world in 1929. There was even a successor planned for it, which would have the same name. However, their era did end. Partly because Hitler saw them as symbols of a previous German regime, the one which had surrendered during the First World War. (Hermann Göring — though a fan of the Zeppelin — ordered the *Graf* dismantled in 1940. He ordered the sister-ship of the *Hindenburg* — LZ-130, *Graf Zeppelin II* — dismantled in 1940. It did fly but never carried passengers; its last flight was on 20 August, 1939.) Partly because the Germans simply could not get helium for the remaining Zeppelins. This abandonment being despite continued popular and press (and even some high ranking Nazi Party member) support for the airship program in Germany and elsewhere. They were not even to be preserved in aviation museums, some of which already housed extremely large airplanes. Even most of the infrastructure was destroyed, the installations at Frankfurt being blown up by Wehrmacht demolition specialists on 6 May, 1940.

So, why did the *Hindenburg* burn? As usual, the disaster was due to a combination of factors. Some of them, being absent, might

have prevented the disaster. Others, if different, might have made it less bad . . . or worse. However, the airship did burn. The conflagration didn't cause the immediate end of airships, but it sure didn't help.

There have been multiple attempts to revive airships through the decades since the *Hindenburg* burned. Some of these are currently ongoing. With helium available for lift and modern, lightweight structural materials, such craft are more practical than ever. (Though some people claim they were never practical. A few say they never can be.) Electric motors — powered by one or more on-board generators with battery supplementation and maybe photovoltaic cells on the top of the envelope — would make for efficient operation. These lighter-than-air craft could be used for cargo which needs to travel faster than by ship but which does not need the extra speed — and expense — of being shipped by airplane. Though slower than airplanes, airships are more fuel efficient, since there is little fuel spent providing lift. With modern resources pressurization is even practical. This would allow higher cruise altitudes, for more-rapid flight. Including passenger trips.

Most of these new airships are either not rigid or only semi-rigid. That is, they don't have a full internal framework containing the cells of lifting gas, with a separate cover for streamlining and weatherproofing. Many are hybrids, with enough gas to counter all or most of their weight, but which still require forward motion through the air to leave the ground with cargo.

As well, there is a strong nostalgic factor involved in reviving airships. Lighter-than-air craft are seen as emblems of a vanished past, an age which was somehow better than the current one. Despite all the problems rampant back then. They are also seen as emblems of wealthy travel and government fiat, during a time of kings and queens and conspicuous consumption by the nobility, which some people see as better than what they have now. The great airships are also possessed of an inherent elegance, which can be appreciated by anyone of any age or level of realistic historical awareness.

None of those are good engineering reasons, of course. However, even engineers can have a sense of esthetics.

STREAMING TO RUSSIA AND MARS

Review by Taras Wolansky of
AWAY

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8787802/>
and

THE QUEEN'S GAMBIT

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt10048342/>

I enjoyed *Away*, Hilary Swank's realistic Mars expedition; though like most streaming series it can be a little slow-moving. Let's keep our fingers crossed, that the first real expedition doesn't have quite this many po-

tentially fatal problems!

We ain't in Roddenberry space no more: the Russian and the Chinese representatives on the international crew are plotting to remove the American commander (Swank).

As if she doesn't have enough troubles already, the brain aneurysm that ended her husband's astronaut career puts him in the hospital, leaving her wracked with guilt over abandoning him and their teenage daughter for three years.

Good performances on all sides.

In the slow-moving department, *Away* doesn't hold a candle to the hit chess fantasy, *The Queen's Gambit*. I ended up skipping a lot of the implausible drama to get to the implausible conclusion. In this alternate history of the 1960s, a young woman (Anya Taylor-Joy) is in contention for chess champion of the world. (Real-life champion Bobby Fischer was the inspiration for the character, I gather, but they're not much alike.)

It's based on a novel by Walter Tevis, author of *The Man Who Fell to Earth*. It amused me to think that Taylor-Joy would have been a good choice to play the alien in that book, because she has a kind of Martian look about her. (On the other hand, this made her a bad choice for Jane Austen's "Emma", in the recent, weak remake.)

Whether derived from the novel, or the filmmakers' heads, the series shows an anti-Christian bias. Christian characters are always portrayed negatively and, growing up in an orphanage in the 1950s surrounded by Christianity, our heroine "intuitively" rejects it. Which does not strike this old atheist as very plausible.

And since the Christian characters tend to dislike communism — this is the height of the Cold War, after all — it's an easy step to "anti-anti-communism".

When a Christian group offers to pay our heroine's way to Russia for a chess tournament, they express their hostility to atheism — but the script doesn't let them mention, oh, mass executions of priests, or believers sent to Siberia for long terms of slave labor. She spurns the group's assistance but eventually makes it to Russia, where everybody is really nice.

One example of the filmmakers' naivety about the Soviet Union is the scene in which allies back in the U.S. give chess tips over the phone to our heroine in Russia. It doesn't occur to anyone that she would be well advised to ignore the advice, because the Russians are certainly listening in.

WORLDCON BIDS

2023

Chengdu
August, 2023

<http://www.worldconinchina.com/index-e.html>

Memphis, Tennessee
August 23-27, 2023

<https://www.memphis23.org/>

New Orleans
(On hiatus)

2024

Glasgow
August 8-12, 2014
<http://glasgow2024.org/>

2025

Seattle
Mid-August 2025

Brisbane, Australia
Mid-August 2025
<https://australia2025.com/>

2026

Jeddah, Saudi Arabia
<https://jedicon.com/>

Los Angeles

Nice, France
August 12-16, 2026
<http://nice2023.com/en/home/>

Orlando
Early to Mid-August 2026

2027

Tel Aviv
August 2027

WORLDCON

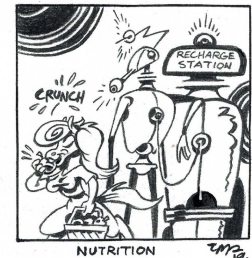
2021

DisCon III
Washington, D.C.
August 25-29, 2021
<http://discon3.org/>

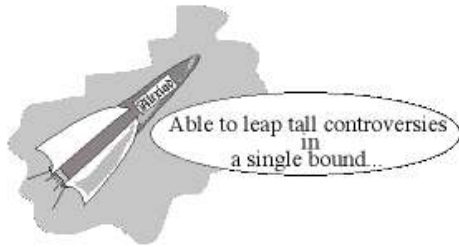
And now it looks like the Washington Marriott Wardman park, the main convention hotel, may be closed. They are doing a poll to choose between a virtual con in August and a physical one in December.

2022

Chicon 8
Chicago
September 1-5, 2022
<http://www.chicon.org>



Letters, we get letters



From: **Tom Feller** October 18, 2020
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Thanks for e-mailing the zine.

George Price's suggestion that people should have enough money in savings to live without a job for a year is a good one, but unrealistic. I haven't read a book on personal finance for many years, but even then, they only recommended having 3 to 6 months income in the bank before investing in the stock market, buying a house, etc. And these books were aimed at people who were sufficiently concerned about money that they would buy a book on the subject! We live in such a consumer-oriented, immediate gratification culture that such thinking is quite rare.

During my several periods of unemployment I had to resort to some very appalling shifts in order to get by. Sometimes I wonder how I made it.

—JTM

Re David Shea's rat joke: When I took Psychology 101, we were given white rats and Skinner boxes. I remember getting attached to my rat, although I don't remember if anyone in my class asked to take their rat home with them after the class was over.

Robert Kennedy reminds me that they have re-opened our dining room here at McKendree. Since we are a married couple, Anita and I can sit at the same table. Otherwise, people have to sit by themselves, except that two people can share a large table so long as they sit on opposite ends.

Anita and I have already voted by mail.

Re Taras Wolansky's theory that *The Big Bang Theory* is a re-telling of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* is a good observation, especially if you count Stuart, Amy, and Bernadette as dwarfs.

From: **Lloyd Penney** November 17, 2020
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Many thanks for *Alexiad* 113, and many thanks for the reminder to get locs in by the end of the month. More and more, I do need

reminders like that. Now for a little catch-up, and I hope, for you, a flood of letters.

Every year, September 11 comes around, and the world mourns. I think that because of politics, those who should have been punished got away because they are rich with petro-dollars. I think the energy that was put into revenge for 9/11 should now be put into the newest war, the war against COVID-19. Unfortunately, we are generally losing that war because we are too entitled, or defensive of our 'liberties' to put on a mask. As I see in many places, mask it, or casket.

After some years of responding to some of the N3F's fanzines, I decided to join up as a Public Member. Nothing has really changed, but I do need to check from time to time if I am indeed getting the fanzines so I can respond. And, Yvonne and I did get our flu shots, and with the face masks to try to keep COVID-19 away, the flu should be kept away, as well.

I am amazed to see upcoming Worldcon bids, and while I will probably never go to another one, I do like the idea that they are still going, if they may have to consider another virtual Worldcon, like the NZ Worldcon. I am thinking there might yet come a year where no one will bid, and a virtual business meeting and virtual Hugos and other awards ceremony will take place on Zoom or Jitsu, or whatever is popular then, and when that happens, that might be the beginning of the end.

Or other things. I'm reminded of Tom Veal's story "Moskva 1995: Igor's Campaign" in Mike Resnick's *Alternate Worldcons and Again, Alternate Worldcons* (1996), where, as a result of some convoluted financial dealing, Worldcon ends up being owned by a Russian corporation.

—JTM

My letter...second peak? Some of the charts I see online and on TV seem to showing a third peak. It is getting worse...Canada is close to 11,000 dead, and the US is close to a quarter million. The world? Close to a million and a third. It's becoming a nightmare, and never was some kind of political hoax. We were at Orwell's last night to pick up some tasty food, and to help our pubnight restaurant. We have gone back a stage, so in-house dining is off the table again, take-out only.

I am pleased to say that I have now worked on five issues of the new *Amazing Stories*, and ten books, seven of which are also connected to *Amazing* with their *Amazing Selects* brand. It feels great to be useful, and have my work valued. If I can get more of this, that would be great. It's late in my career, but this is the most promising it's looked in a long time. May it continue as long as possible; it's made me feel useful and busy in this pandemic.

Letters to fanzines like this one also make me feel useful. I hope you find this letter useful, too. Thanks for this issue, and see you with the

next.

From: **John Purcell** November 19, 2020
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It has been way, way too long since I have written to you with comments on your long-running fanzine. I apologize for being so delinquent on the loc-writing side of things, but this crazy plague year has really thrown a spanner into the works. At least I have a bit of time at the present to write something about the 113th edition of *Alexiad*.

First off, Joe's comments about the N3F on page one remind me that I really have no desire to join this organization. In fact, I never have felt the urge to do so. I do, however, enjoy receiving and reading the various publications the N3F produces, notably *Tightbeam* and the Book Review zine. You have to admit that the nine fanzines the N3F produces on a regular schedule is admirable, and I might even write a letter of comment on the latest *Tightbeam* this coming weekend. It all depends on how much time I can squeeze into my schedule; the next batch of student essays are being submitted tonight, which means tomorrow morning I start grading these literary gems. Yeah, writing a loc sounds like a good break from doing those essays.

All these convention cancellations are mind-numbing. I have attempted to do a couple virtual conventions — ArmadilloCon 42 at the end of August, and this weekend is DeepSouthCon's virtual edition — and so far my reaction is a hearty "meh." The jury is still out on this aspect of modern-day fan activity. Hopefully this coming weekend's DSC will be a bit of fun. I hope so. I could certainly use a bit of fannish camaraderie these days. Me-thinks we all do.

After watching the launch of Dragon-1 this past Sunday evening, I am definitely hopeful that the future of manned space exploration moves forward into new territory, I look forward to the Artemis missions, and the real possibility of living to see men and women on Mars. Current plans have humans back on the moon in five years, and off to Mars and the asteroid belt by the mid 2030's. That would put me in my early 80s when the Mars missions land, so this is something to look forward to. Why the hell not? I would love to see it happen.

All I can say about the name of Her Royal Highness Princess Delphine van Saksen-Coburg/de Saxe-Coburg should be glad she is not playing on a baseball team. Her name would need to be continued across the backs of four players' jerseys.

Well, Valerie and I were hoping — still are, in fact — of making it to Washington, DC for DisCon III next year, but now we are not so sure. It all depends on how this damnable Covid-19 pandemic is doing by the late spring. I am not holding my breath much longer about

this. The recent test results from two major research studies on vaccination progress is most heartening, but I am still skeptical of their efficacy. I will feel much better if multiple trials have similar 90-95% success ratios. Keeping our fingers crossed.

And finally, I got a good chuckle out of "The Real Solution of *The War of the Worlds*." Now it makes perfectly good sense!

I noticed how you enjoyed the original cartoon.

—JTM

From: **Richard A. Dengrove** Nov. 20, 2020
2651 Arlington Drive, #302, Alexandria, VA 22306-3626 USA
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Some comments on *Alexiad*, October 2020.

You talk about the Artemis Moon Landing. I have had a theory about space travel. For now, our progress in space travel depends on whether there is economic advantage to being in outer space. Hence, the communications and geographical satellites are well funded. Whether Artemis lands on the Moon will depend on how much money is in the purse. These days, very little. And it will remain that way until the fashion for national prestige returns like they were in the time of John F. Kennedy.

No bucks, no Buck Rogers.

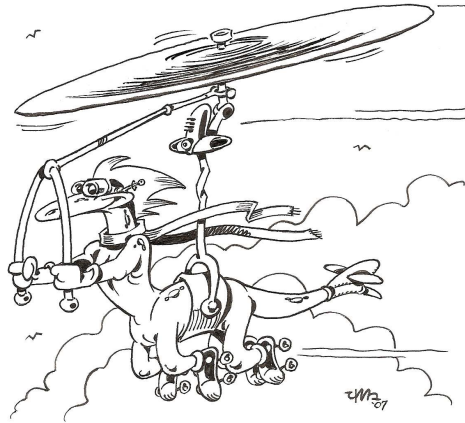
From achieving Moon landings, we go to realistic writing. It makes things more realistic for people in the know if historical novels or series echo the attitudes of the period. Of course, how many people in the know are there? There must not be many. I recently read Dumas' original *The Man in the Iron Mask*. It was popular during Dumas' time. However, no way would the movies tell the real plot. It would violate our sense of justice; and bring the wrath of the Catholic Church.

We go from 19th Century France (looking back at 17th Century France) to a modern utopia, *Islandia*. It would be wonderful to live a harmonious life. However, if you're writing a book, you need action and adventure, i.e., disharmony. That *Islandia* is a utopia is mere advertising. The characters of no novel can lead harmonious lives.

Enough of the articles; now we go to the letters. In your comment on mine, you respond to what I said about Conan Doyle's *Maracot Deep*. In turn, I have a somewhat irrelevant comment. It's not a well known novel. I suspect, after he did research on nautical matters, he wrote it very fast for *The Strand Magazine* in England and *The Saturday Evening Post* in the US. Where it was serialized in 1927 and 1928. I admit he showed a lot of imagination with his futuristic remnants of Atlantis at the bottom of the Atlantic. On the other hand, his attempt at American slang was a bust.

That is a common problem. Look at how poorly I an Fleming did it.

—JTM



In Lloyd's letter, I comment on some lower powered subject. He says he is making Jewelry. I hope he makes money from it. I suspect he needs it. In addition, he says he is not worthy of the praise I gave him. I think he is more than worthy.

In George Price's letter, he hopes that the deficit doesn't undercut our savings. I agree that we have been running deficits like there is no tomorrow, both in Republican and Democratic Administrations. However, it is supposed to send inflation sky high and it hasn't. So both Republican and Democratic Congresses haven't minded them. I once searched the web for economists' pronouncements on such hyper-budget busting; and they can't figure why it produces only moderate inflation either.

In David Shea's letter, he complains that the new libraries have fewer hardcopy books and magazines and more online reading matter. The problem is that libraries have a cash flow problem. Governments are usually stingy with them. That is why they were among the first to embrace the computer revolution; and make their budgets stretch.

Of course, why not sell, for almost nothing, publications given free by the public?

In Robert Kennedy's letter, he wonders why all aliens are humanoid, breathe the same air, and speak standard American English. The answer is simple: it saves money. Also, the writers don't have to use as much imagination. There is one exception, though: the series *Babylon 5* includes one alien race who doesn't look like a human, breathe the same air, and speak American English – the Vorlons.

In John Hertz's letter, he rebukes in rhyme. I agree the late Jerry Pournelle, the man rebuked, believed all proper fans were like him. Which is why he was nice to a friend who pretended to be like him.

From the letters, we go to a parody of the *Twilight Zone* on the last page. It never was as boring as the world the writer presents. Nobody

would watch it if it was.

From: **Robert S. Kennedy** Nov. 22, 2020
The Terraces of Boise, 5301 East Warm Springs Ave., Apt. B306, Boise, ID 83716-6205
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Thank for Vol. 19 No.5 (October 2020, Whole Number 113).

I hope that that "the repercussions of your coincidental problems" get better and you can produce a full *Alexiad* because receiving it is one of the highlights of my existence here.

Things are still about the same. New day, same thing.

My computer system was down for two weeks. But it's back up now, clearly.

Yes, the death of Diana Rigg was a tragedy. She will, however, be appearing in *Black Narcissus* (FX) in November and *All Creatures Great and Small* (PBS) in January.

I've watched my last *DS9*.

I'm still watching *Star Trek: Discovery* on CBS even though the acting hasn't improved much. It's something to do in the evening.

There a several TV shows that are coming back; but I'm not sure how they are doing it. *Young Sheldon*, *The Blacklist*, *Bull*, *NCIS*. I'm also watching *B Positive* which is an interesting concept. But they could do without the obnoxious canned sound track.

I still think that the Neanderthals just died out. Perhaps because they could not compete with *Homo sapiens*. But a lot of sex obviously went on between them resulting in those of us with European ancestors' having Neanderthal DNA. I'm proud of my 2.8% Neanderthal DNA and have a T-shirt to prove it. Then there are the Denisovans and other extinct species. We humans apparently have a lot of non-*Homo sapien* ancestors that are being discovered.

Well, that's about it for now.

From: **George W. Price** November 25, 2020
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October *Alexiad*:

When Judge Barrett was appointed to the Supreme Court I assumed that, as a woman, she would not be accused of dropping her pants at a wild party. And she wasn't.

No, they accused her of being a handmaid, as in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Those accusations of pants-dropping strike me as more than a little fishy, because that's not how I would expect a lecherous man to expose himself to a woman.

It's hard to believe he would bother to unbuckle his belt and drop his pants (presumably also his underpants), when all he really needs to do is what he already does several times a day standing at the toilet. No, he just

unzips his fly.

A classic limerick nails it:

There was a young lady from Exeter
Whose shape made the men crane their
nexeater.
And some who were brave
Would pull out and wave
The distinguishing mark of their sexeter.

To unzip and pull out is far simpler than dropping one's pants. It occurs to me that if a woman has never actually had a man expose himself to her, and wishes to make a false accusation, pants dropping is what she would naturally think of, because that's what she would have to do to expose herself.

Well, perhaps I am overthinking this and reading too much into a simple phrase.

Richard Dengrove compliments me as being "a man of principle" because I can criticize Trump when I think he is wrong.

Yes, I try to distinguish between the policy and the person. Certainly I do not feel that supporting some of Trump's policies obliges me to support all of them.

I have never felt any personal loyalty to him — in fact I have found him rather disgusting. I voted for him this time, but only because I dread the policies I expect Biden to pursue, such as the Green New Deal. And I would rather be disgusted than scared.

And speaking of personal loyalty— Some extreme Trump-haters expected him to refuse to give up the presidency on January 20th. Fortunately, he is now cooperating with the transition. Had he not, he would have discovered something about loyalty. Those Secret Service agents and Marine guards who have stood ready to take a bullet for him these last four years would quite happily frog-march him out of the White House. Because their loyalty is not to him personally, but to the office, the nation, and the Constitution.

Right after Kamala Harris was nominated, The Wall Street Journal ran an op-ed pointing out the irony that her mother's upper-class Tamil Brahmin family emigrated from India precisely to escape the kind of semi-socialist system that Ms. Harris now wants to impose on us. Sometimes the apple does fall far from the tree.

Mr. Dengrove also mentions the failure of the Nazis to develop an atomic bomb. An excellent account of this is *Alsos*, by Samuel Goudsmit, who was, as I recall, on the team that went into Germany right after the war to investigate the Nazi project. (I believe I mentioned this in *Alexiad* several years ago.)

The Nazi failure was partly because, as Mr. Dengrove says, they "failed to put enough blood and treasure into the project."

Another cause was Werner Heisenberg's overconfidence that German preeminence in science and engineering ensured that they were well ahead of anything the Allies might be doing. So they didn't push as hard as they should have. To give Heisenberg his due, his confidence was not entirely baseless: Germany really was way ahead of the Allies in several areas, notably rocketry and jet propulsion. In any case, the Nazis apparently never even considered giving the project the priority and resources that we gave the Manhattan Project.

Shudder to think, what if they had?

The most advanced Nazi nuclear program (there were several) was run by the Reichspost. I imagine:

Our words are backed by
NUCLEAR WEAPONS!

We propose an increase in postage rates of 1 pfennig for the first 30 grams and ½ pfennig for each additional 30 grams . . .

—JTM

It's been suggested that the Democrats' hard-left faction accepted Joe Biden not because he was a strong candidate who would unify the party, but rather because they see him as a weak character whom they can dominate. My fear of that is why I voted for Trump, holding my nose. Well, we will see — God help us all.

One problem with that \$600-a-week pandemic relief package for laid-off workers is that when it was added to the regular unemployment benefit, the total often came to more than a worker would make on the job. And that, unsurprisingly, made many workers reluctant to go back to work, which in turn delayed re-opening businesses. That's what we get from politicians more interested in spending money than in calculating the consequences.

I think we could do it better. When a worker is laid off in an emergency like this, check his Social Security account to see how much he has been making. (This might require changing privacy laws.) Then let the emergency benefit be a flat percentage, say 60% or 75%, of his usual income, with the benefit capped at maybe \$60,000 per year. And of course — very important! — subtract from that whatever he is getting from state unemployment insurance and any other sources.

The reason for checking his Social Security account rather than his employer is to find his actual total income — he might have more than one employer, or he might be in business for himself and have no employer. I see no reason why self-employed people should not qualify for this emergency relief.

In this pandemic crisis we will of course politely ignore inconvenient questions about the

constitutionality of all this relief spending, and also not ask where all that money will come from.



From: **Darrell Schweitzer** Nov. 26, 2020
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There aren't as many comment hooks in *Alexiad* as usual this time (Oct 2020) and I apologize for my tardiness in response. But I did find a few.

I would agree with Taras Wolansky that the Hugos have been rendered pretty much useless due to demographic bloc voting. It is reasonable to ask now, if something wins a Hugo, "Is it any good?" or even "Is it of professional quality?" An award-win merely tells us something about who the author is. I do not however believe that this decay has reached the Retro-Hugos. I think the dominant factor there is what fans remember, so that a story by a largely forgotten author like, say, Malcolm Jameson, would stand no chance. This is why we have seen such strange results like H.P. Lovecraft being nominated for years after his death. Leigh Brackett is of course remembered. I would not say that her early work is necessarily "hack" work. It may be less accomplished than her later work, but so what? Most of Heinlein's early 1940s work is not quite as good as what he was turning out in his peak years of the early to mid-'50s. "The Shadow Over Mars" was good enough to be republished as a book (as *Nemesis from Terra*). *Startling Stories* was by no means a "bottom feeding" magazine in those days, but solidly in the middle of the field, probably the second-best SF magazine in existence in 1944 (which was, because of the war, not a prosperous year for pulp publishing) because it featured novels, and so was one of the very few markets for original science fiction novels. If you actually go back and look at the first few years of *Startling*, the two novels that will stand out as classics are *The Black Flame* by

Stanley Weinbaum and *Twice in Time* by Manly Wade Wellman. You will also find solidly good material (at least by the standards of the time) by Edmond Hamilton, Jack Williamson, Wellman, and others.

The two women editors mentioned, Dorothy McIlwraith and Mary Gnaedinger were not “obscure” or unimportant either, certainly not to readers of the period. Margaret Brundage is a strange choice for 1944, as her career was almost over by then, but then you would have to be a pulp collector to know that. When *Weird Tales* moved from Chicago to New York, her covers became very infrequent, because her work was in chalk pastel and was too fragile to send through the mail.

This is the inherent weakness in the retro-Hugos is that very few voters, and that apparently includes Taras Wolansky, are knowledgeable enough to vote or nominate intelligently. The other winners also reflect what is remembered today, and it must be admitted that to find any “related work” in 1944 is a bit of a stretch. The idea of Fritz Leiber as a fan writer in 1944 is pretty absurd, but he is a name voters recognize and that is all it takes. How one feature film, *Heaven Can Wait* won for “long form” and other feature films, *The Curse of the Cat People* and *The Canterville Ghost* won for “for short form” is beyond me, unless someone is counting minutes of running time and one happens to be a little longer than the others.

I would have preferred for the nominations at least to be juried; have people who knew the era decide what should be nominated.

As for the Hugos themselves, I think we just have to shrug them off now. I blame Vox Day. He swore he would leave “a smoking hole” where the Hugos used to be, and he has succeeded, ironically, by the defeat of the Puppies campaigns. The reaction against it has done the job for him. He is probably gloating and saying “I told you so.” Founding a counter-award isn’t going to help. We just have to do without. I suspect that it will soon be discovered that these awards bear no relationship to sales. It’s possible that we won’t be seeing any more Hugo Winners anthologies because they won’t sell either. Once the politics have faded away, there will be a Darwinian selection based on sales. We shall have to see what survives and what people even ten years from now care about.

So he succeeded where Charles Platt failed.

— JTM

From: **Timothy Lane** November 28, 2020
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I found the review of Ann Rule's *Practice to Deceive* especially interesting because it

seems unfamiliar. I wouldn't have thought there was anything left by her I hadn't read yet, but by 2014 things were starting to get dicey for my book-buying. Fortunately, I have an e-book addition courtesy of Grant and Joe.

Another such e-book is *Antediluvian* by Wil McCarthy, which involves a professor sending mind back to his ancestors in a form of time travel. The first section is neolithic, but the next involves the interaction between Neanderthals and Cro-Magnons. Later sections go even further back.

For those who are curious, Challenger Deep is in the Marianas Trench. I think the trench is located to the east of the islands, though I don't know where Challenger Deep is within it.

The scene from *Catch-22* in which a bomber pilot goes mad and cuts up someone comes from the book, though I don't recall how graphic the scene is in the book is.

I've seen white rats as pets being brought to InConJunction, and Grant had a pet rat (though this was before I knew him). A key scene in the *Alfred Hitchcock Hour* episode “How to Get Rid of Your Wife” (a comedy starring Bob Newhart) involves rats available in a pet store.

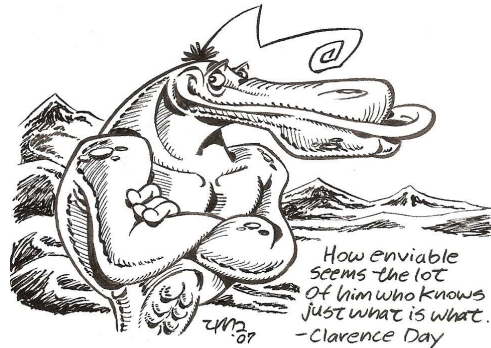
Elizabeth and I once got some such fake notification about winning the PCH prize. I think it was a phone call, which at first encouraged us — who couldn't use all that money? — until we, umm, smelled a rat.

You were lucky. What I get are telephone calls telling me that I am going to have money withdrawn from my account for some bill unless I call and settle.

—JTM

Nevada has “none of the above” as an option on its ballots, though it's more like an advisory. Back in 1976, a Republican congressional candidate won his primary, except that he actually came in second to “none of the above”. Naturally, though he technically won, his general election was probably doomed by the embarrassment. He didn't win, in any case. (I think his opponent, a Watergate baby, was Harry Reid.)

How strong and steadfast those without
The least uncertainty or doubt.



How enviable
seems the lot
of him who knows
just what is what.
— Clarence Day

From: **Taras Wolansky** December 1, 2020
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Thanks for the October 2020 issue of *Alexiad*.

Joe: N3F is back from the dead and livelier than ever? I left it many years ago but I don't remember very well the reasons; something to do with censorship in the newsletter, I think. I remember David Hartwell calling it “the halt and lame of fandom”. Which struck me at the time as the halt and lame calling the halt and lame, like degrees of nerdhood.

It used to be the home of clueless neos; now it seems to be the last refuge of old fen and tired.

Diana Rigg “only appeared for two series [of *The Avengers*], leaving because she was paid less than the cameraman.” I wonder how many millions of pounds that bad decision cost the producers in the long run.

Review of *The Perilous Quest for Lyonesse*, volumes 1 & 2: The success of *The Lord of the Rings* in paperback soon elicited a paperback reprint of Austin Tappan Wright's *Islandia* in, I think, the late 1960s.

I remember being favorably impressed, but not much else: a pleasant journey through Utopia, with little drama.

The upper classes of *Islandia* decided the country didn't need technology. When the Japanese conquered the place I would venture to say they had an interesting time.

Richard A. Dengrove: Groan!

Robert S. Kennedy: For good acting in *Star Trek: Discovery*, look to the old pros, Jason Isaacs in the first season and Michelle Yeoh in the second.

Perhaps not surprisingly, *Star Trek: Picard*, with an old pro front and center, is the better show.

If you had called the number on the fake Publishers Clearing House letter, they would have probably told you to deposit the \$6000 check and execute a wire transfer for a nominal fee, say, \$1500. By the time the check bounced, the wire transfer would have already gone through. At least, this is a scam that I ran into, some years back.

I got a call the other day saying that my payment on the power bill was overdue and the electricity would be shut off in an hour, unless I called to make a payment. I went and checked the LG&E website and it said I owed \$0.00.

—JTM

David M. Shea: Your Congressman joke is a variant of the greatest lawyer joke ever told.

"Did you hear that they're starting to use lawyers instead of rats in laboratory experiments?"

"There's more of them; they're easier to train; the staff doesn't grow attached to them; and besides, there are some things a rat won't do!"

From: **AL du Pisani** December 9, 2020
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I live in the fear that my beloved government is going to screw up my third attempt at taking a holiday this year.

I originally planned to go on a church outreach to a missionary in Mozambique at the end of April – Which was cancelled when the government imposed the three week lockdown – later increased to five weeks, and while gradually lightened, we are still under movement and meeting restrictions.

My next attempt at taking a holiday in early July was also stymied. While I could leave my house, I could not fly anywhere. As far as I remember, flying other by the government, politicians and people travelling for business was only allowed as at the end of September.

We had three domestic airlines. Only one of them is fully operational, with less flights than before. Another one recently restarted operations. And then there is the government owned and run SAA – Just about everybody knows that the only thing left to do with it is to take it behind the barn and shoot it. But there is still some government officials and union leaders that insists that the grateful public wants to do nothing better with their money than to give another ten or twenty Billion Rands so that the public officials in charge of looting can continue on their merry way.

Even as we find out who stole what – and it is staggering amounts. The Zondo State Capture Commission have been turning over rocks and finding all sorts of malfeasance. Have as far as I know not resulted in anybody losing their jobs, being changed with crimes or convicted.

As of the end of September my congregation could resume public church services. I am grateful for both the daily message I received, and the weekly sermons. But it is not the same as being in the presence of your fellows. The live church gatherings are not going well from an attendance perspective – Where previously I would have thought a service with 250 people to be on the small side of things, these days we are struggling to get 100 people.

My congregation was always a bit unusual as to its composition, with about a third under 21, a third between 21 and 60, and the last third over 60 years in age. Since most of the

people over 60 are in retirement communities, old age homes and the like, we have not seen them – they are under a much more severe lockdown that we are. A friend of mine is in an old age home – if he leaves the place for any reason and comes back, he have to spend a week in quarantine.

We are also not seeing the young people at church, which is ironic, since they are the least likely to get Wuhan Pneumonia and the least likely to get seriously affected.

We did manage to hold a church basaar (fete), which went OK, but it looks as if mostly food was sold. Handiwork and white elephants did not get a lot of traction.

We have not had an in person meeting for the local SF club since February. From September onwards we have tried a monthly video meeting, which went well some times. But I am in need of personal contact, and the presence of my fellows.

I have managed to attend two in person braais with friends over the past four months. But it looks like even that is too much for some people, who are cowering in place and living in fear.

My family seems to be OK. I have a nephew studying in New York, and he seems to be OK. My nieces are highly unhappy with staying at home for most of lockdown – they wanted to go to school and meet up with their friends. My brother is OK, just had to work at night during part of lockdown for some reason.

My sister the primary school teacher mentioned something funny – They are limited to getting half the class for two days of the week, swapping with the other half for the rest of the week. And she is getting more done, as she is spending a lot less time managing the childrens' interactions with each other, and more time teaching. But I do not know how much longer she will teach – she seemed to have reached the end of that road.

Early this year I started noticing that I am running out of roads. Nothing serious, but I can see that it is time to move on. And then I had to put my life on hold for the rest of the year.

I have managed to continue finding new authors, some of which I end up mainlining. But there have also been times where I had to drag myself to read something, for a short while, as I shut down at the end of the day and before going to bed. More and more I am finding that when I get into the bookshop, I ignore all kinds of fiction, and try to find something new in the crafts or graphic novels section. And for the latter it is mostly European art.

You've seen that in the review columns, where most of the fiction I review is Alternate History. The Hugo winners don't seem to be interesting (also, see Darrell Schweitzer's letter, above). There is always something new turning up in espionage, though. The latest is "Nigel West's" new book, *The Kompromat Conspiracy* (2020). He

says things a lot of people won't want to hear.

—JTM

Somewhere in the last 25 years a huge lot of goodwill and shared culture have been destroyed. And we are reaping the harvest already.

I have been thinking a bit about Culture – I think that the one lesson the world has been doing its utmost not to learn from 9/11 has been that Culture Matters. And that a lot of what is casually dismissed as racism are actually cultures in conflict.

I once talked with an Old Liberal who bemoaned the experience he had that the dumb Afrikaner politicians of the 1950s onwards had a better understanding of what would happen once the ANC came into power than he had, and he was the one that were rubbing shoulders with the next generation of leaders at university. I suspect the reason for that is because he did not take the culture from which these people came seriously, and expected them to adopt his culture willingly and enthusiastically. Whereas a lot of the Afrikaners actually grew up in close contact with the cultures from whence the ANC leadership came, knew the common people and could often speak their languages natively.

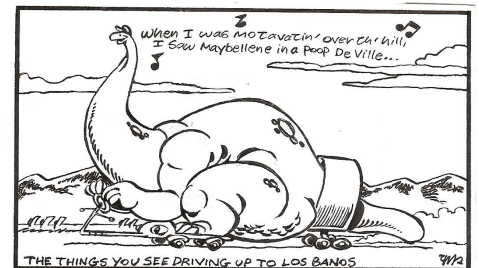
It was utterly clear that the old ways of Apartheid were unsustainable and morally wrong. It is not clear that the new ways are in all ways superior. And I think that in part it is because there is a wilful blindness to culture and the role it plays in peoples' lives.

It is therefore unfortunate that the very people who might be approached now for guidance in this regard have spent the last 75 odd years destroying their credibility.

A bit of a dark note to end up with. Unfortunately this has been that kind of year. I hope that life will be treating you better, and that next year will be better than this year.

WAHF:

Martin Morse Wooster, with various items of interest.
Marty Cantor, Nic Farey, Pat McCray, Taral Wayne, with thanks.



JACK AND THE BIRD

That was not a crash of thunder. Jack Ryan woke up, concerned at the sound in the kitchen. John Clark had tested the security system and made some improvements; but as National Security Advisor, Ryan was always at risk. But Cathy might be back with the children.

He got up and headed for the kitchen. It was dark, lit by occasional flashes of thunder.

"Hi."

The man standing in the other door was tall, dressed in black leather, with a high collar. He was bald and he had a certain stare . . . and two automatics.

For a moment Jack was paralyzed. There were any number of people who would want to kill him and he wondered who he was from. Then he got an answer, but not one that was any help.

"Do you have any peanut butter?"

Stunned, Jack said, "What!?"

There was another man in the kitchen. He reached over and turned on the light, revealing himself; small, dark hair, beaky nose, elegantly dressed with a high collar and long coat, and confident.

"Peanut butter. Smooth, for preference," he said with a shrug.

Jack said, "Security six-one-seven bingo." That was the command to lock the doors, buzz the sentries, and call the police.

There was also supposed to be a siren. There wasn't.

The bald man stooped and picked up a head. He moved its mouth and said, "Oh. Hi, Boss. How about a bottle of beer?" He was smiling devilishly throughout. Then the two men began to laugh as the bald man dropped the head in the kitchen sink.

The small man opened a cupboard, took out a jar of peanut butter, got two slices of bread, and prepared himself a sandwich. As he did he said, "Let me share a dilemma with you. May I? I need you to do something for me that I know you won't want to do."

Jack said, "What is it?"

The man put the sandwich on the counter and hobbled towards him. "With most people, there's no problem. I find their weak spots and use violence or blackmail to persuade them, but you, you are a man of extreme importance. You have the power of the federal government behind you. You must be handled carefully, or extremely."

Jack kept on shifting his gaze from one man to the other, as the bald man came closer. Where were the police? The Secret Service?

"You do have many weak spots. Your actions with the IRA, and in that recent crisis in Denver could be seriously questioned. Even that woman who was rumored to be your mistress. But you, you are known as a man of masterful action, so threats of personal violence will only harden your resolve."

Dazed, Jack stammered, "No, uh . . ."

The little man banged on the counter. "Come, sir, don't be modest. You are a rare animal. But . . . that does lead us to a sad pickle. Since I can't persuade you to do as I ask, the only rational option is to kill you and negotiate with whomever replaces you as National Security Advisor."

"Now, chief?" The bald man had drawn a pistol and was giving his boss a look of dire anticipation.

"One moment, Victor. Mr. Ryan deserves time to process all this, say a prayer, or what have you."

Jack had to know. "What do you want me to do?" he said.

"It's not worth talking about. You wouldn't do it," the little man said with a confident smile.

Jack gritted out a reply. "Tell me."

"I need the information on what the Cali Cartel did after you directed the destruction of their rivals in Medellin, and your contacts with them."

Jack snorted at the presumption, and the little man said with a laugh, "You see, you hated that idea."

"There weren't any."

The bald man racked a round into his pistol. "Do you want me to kill him now?"

"No, make him a nice cheese toast. Yes, kill him now, please?"

"Just wanted to be clear." The bald man stepped closer and thrust his gun into Jack's face, his finger tightened on the trigger . . .

"NO! WAIT! Let's talk about this!"

He had seen death but never so close, or from someone more cold-blooded. Jack wanted to bargain.

"Sorry. Least worst option," the little man said. "Unless . . . No, you would never agree."

"TO WHAT!? AGREE TO WHAT!?" Jack was desperate.

The little man only smiled.

Jack was reading the report. It said that club owner and reputed gangster Oswald Cobblepot had been in Gotham all night, at one or the other of his two nightclubs, and the serial killer Victor Zsasz was in a mental hospital. But someone had played a terrifying joke with a prop head.

How he justified his humiliating decision to leak confidential material about the administration's war on drugs was another matter, and that he had done it covertly might yet come back to haunt him.

What he did not know was that that evening, as a car sped away with the two men, a third sat in the back seat laughing. "Security system!" he said. "Riddle me this: Why is that security system like a paper towel?"

"Eddie, you're a wonder!"

— Not by Tom Clancy

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Art: What we are mainly looking for is small fillos. Your fillo will probably be scanned in and may be reused, unless you object to its reuse.

Contributions: This is not a fictionzine. It is intended to be our fanzine, so be interesting.

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