

# OBIR MAGAZINE

The Occasional Biased & Ignorant Review Magazine of Canadian Speculative Fiction  
Dedicated to Promoting the Absurd Personal Literary Taste of R. Graeme Cameron  
(Issue # 5 – January 2017)

**PULP**  
*Literature*

Issue No. 8  
Autumn 2015

**Julian Mortimer Smith**  
**Mel Anastasiou**  
**Joanna Lesher**  
**Tais Teng**  
**Fred Zackel**  
**dvsduncan**

**JJ Lee**  
**'The Man In the  
Long Black Coat'**

*Good books for the price of a beer!*

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## EDITORIAL

I make no apologies over the fact that most of the work reviewed was published a long time ago. All of it is still available for purchase (as indicated by the links provided) and if the reviews spark your interest, by all means acquire these books!

I do apologize for not publishing since last January. Suffice to say that Chairing VCON 41 drove me to distraction and left me feeling numb. However, beginning to feel more like my old self again. I aim to publish OBIR more often, and to facilitate this I will no longer concentrate on fixed numbers of reviews (novels in particular take me a long time to read and think about) but will instead concentrate on getting as many done in a two or three month time period as I can. This may result in slimmer issues but at least they will be more frequent.

Besides, OBIR is really just a fanzine wherein I attempt to share the fun I’m having as I explore contemporary Canadian SpecFic. It’s not as if OBIR is a significant literary journal. Just one fan’s opinions

hurled into the ether. With any luck, some people find it amusing, or at least interesting. A fun retirement hobby is what it is. Didn't have time for it last year, but I do now.

\*\*\*\*\*

Canadian Magazines are as rare as hen's teeth, nevertheless I like to review each and every story per issue when they come out. So, no doubt many of you are asking, is The Graeme going to review the stories in *Polar Borealis*, his fiction zine?

Hell, no! I'm too close to the stories, for one thing, having pulled them out of the slush pile and, in some instances, worked with the authors to "improve" the stories. (I'm sort of a bargain bin John W. Campbell in that sense). I don't want to be perceived as playing favourites either. I publish what I like and will leave my explanation there. Let the stories and poems speak for themselves.

Hopefully my reviews of other magazine's stories won't scare any author away from submitting to *Polar Borealis*. Since my reviews are purely subjective (as opposed to academic) they give readers/writers a good idea of what pleases me and what doesn't which, in theory, helps them submit the type of material I usually want to publish.

Polar Borealis is currently closed to submissions (except poetry) because I've received tons of stuff I want to publish. I should be open to submissions again late summer 2017 or so. I hope.

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Mainstream book publishing and magazine publishing in general may be in some difficulties in this time of changing tastes and methods, but independent Canadian small press publishers forge ahead with magazines and anthologies (not to mention novels) featuring a wide array of Canadian authors both established and new who offer highly original tales in the SF&F genre.

Of course, all of these publishers are eager to sell beyond the borders of Canada and are (most of them) open to submissions from outside our borders, but there's no escaping a strong emphasis on Canadian authors. In the past, decades ago, there was a tendency to dismiss local, homegrown authors as not nearly worth reading as the most popular American and British authors. However, just as there has been an explosion of foreign authors reacting to SF&F going mainstream, there are now easily more than a hundred Canadian Authors getting their work published, and all of them well worth reading indeed.

This is my way of saying that if you restrict your reading to Canadian authors and works published in Canada you will nevertheless have a plethora of choices in excess of what used to be available from all countries combined back in the 1950s. Readers who think Canadian Speculative Fiction is a tiny garden of small potatoes are out of touch. They have no idea that the fields now extend to the horizon and that the flavor, texture, and size of said potatoes would make Prince Edward Island envious.

### **Concerning review copies:**

I welcome Canadian publishers sending me PDFs of books (especially anthologies) or magazines for review purposes. Likewise Canadian authors, even if your story or book is published in another country.

Note that I won't be reviewing foreign authors unless their work is within a book or magazine published by a Canadian company. OBIR Magazine is dedicated to CANADIAN SpecFic.

PDFs can be sent to me at < [The Graeme](#) > I can't guarantee to review it in a timely manner, but I intend to make the effort.

If you wish to send me a hardcopy (which I find easier to read than computer screens), send your book or magazine to:

R. Graeme Cameron  
13315 104<sup>th</sup> Ave, Apt 72-G  
Surrey, B.C. Canada  
V3T 1V5

Once read, I'll pass it on to any local fan who wants to read it.

I prefer to think I'm going to have fun with OBIR. Hopefully my readers will too.

Please send me feedback! You can reach me at: < [The Graeme](#) >

Or my Twitter account: < [@rgraemecameron](#) >

And don't forget to check out my website < [Cdn. SF Zine Archive](#) > which is devoted to the history of Canadian SF Fandom and Fanzines!

Be sure to check out my OBIR website at < [OBIR Magazine](#) >

And above all, be sure to go to my site hosting the three issues to-date of my paying-market SF&F fiction-zine *Polar Borealis*. The latest issue (Nov / Dec 2016) has 18 short stories and 13 poems by Canadian authors. Download all three issues for free at < [Polar Borealis Magazine](#) >

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## REVIEWS

### REVIEWING SYSTEM (newly revised)

(Note: number of (\*) = number of stars.)

- (5\*) *Exhilarating* = Really, really exciting. Eye-opening. Dance a jig time.
- (4\*) *Great Fun* = Thoroughly enjoyed it. Ripping good yarn. Stimulating.
- (3\*) *Entertaining* = Pleasing. Memorable. A good read. Worthwhile.
- (2\*) *Interesting* = Something intriguing about it, but not enough to get me excited.
- (1\*) *Not to my taste* = Doesn't appeal to me due to my personal prejudices.

Note that my rating system doesn't judge works on their intrinsic merit so much as how they run up against my personal preferences and prejudices. Readers should bear this in mind. I could be dead wrong about everything!

As always, Canadian publishers, editors, artists and authors are identified, some marked for consideration of upcoming Aurora awards if the publication date is relevant.

Note that the term **(Cdn)** includes non-citizens living and working in Canada.

Also note that **(AAE 2017)** means Aurora Award Eligible in 2017.

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## PERIODICALS

**PULP LITERATURE** Magazine **(Cdn)** – #8 – (Autumn 2015) – [Find it here](#)

Edited by *Melanie Anastasiou* – **(Cdn – B.C.)**

*Jenifer Landels* – **(Cdn – B.C.)**

And *Susan Pieters* – **(Cdn – B.C.)**

**Contents:**

**The Man in the Long Black Coat** – by *JJ Lee* – **(Cdn)**

*Premise:* Four very young country lads are conscripted by the Volkssturm and driven off into the snowy night. Their truck is caught up in a battle in a forest at the foot of a mountain. The lads are rescued by what appear to be Waffen SS, albeit an especially elite unit dedicated to correcting the mistakes of the SS and Gestapo. The soldiers are somewhat morally suspect, to put it mildly, but are very solicitous of the boys, offering them a sumptuous meal and hot bathes, rather unusual amenities for an ice-bound cave in the mountainside. Naturally all is not what it seems. The boys are in trouble.

*Rating:* **(3\*) Entertaining** – Not your usual Christmas story. Suffice to say I am a sucker for anything Lovecraftian, and this story is VERY Lovecraftian. I am also a sucker for history as a basis for fantasy-horror fiction, and the premise is credible given Himmler's intense interest in the occult and known tendency to search for that best left hidden. The story is a logical extrapolation of what would occur should the SS archaeologists be successful in their quest. However, this is not *Indiana Jones*. What's at stake is a village suffering from the true power of folklore, namely the possibility that "fairy tales" might actually be true. Call it an unusually grim Brothers Grimm tale with an astonishing interpretation of the real function of a beloved Christmas character. Makes one want to be a life-long city dweller. To heck with the countryside. Too nasty. Especially around Christmas.

**World of Dew** – by *Julian Mortimer Smith*

*Premise:* Captain Jacobs belongs to the Intergalactic Brotherhood of Relativity Freighters. Such people have no ties with any other human beings, since a short trip from one star system to another involves hundreds or even thousands of years of outside time. The Brotherhood recruits (and combats loneliness) by allowing one or more stowaways on every trip. But lately Jacobs' newfound friends and potential crew members no sooner land at the next planetfall when they crumple and die. No one knows why. Jacobs is beginning to get worried.

*Rating:* **(3\*) Entertaining** – This is definitely an idea piece. The amount of thought that has gone into working out the implications of FTL flight is impressive. Sophisticated even. I particularly like the concept that none of the Brotherhood bother speaking their native language to each other when they meet, even though automatic translators are ubiquitous throughout the galaxy. Why? Because it's too depressing. Over the eons of

outside time relative to their short flights their native language invariably evolves into something else, or goes extinct. So the Brotherhood prefers to speak Freight Tongue, a language deliberately designed to be incapable of change. Very cool concept that. As for the plot, a bit of misdirection fooled me, but once I noted the ending I figured it was inevitable, given the premise. Wouldn't go so far as to say predictable, but close. Still, an interesting mystery with an intriguing evil behind it all, an evil at first sight seeming an old cliché yet justified and explained with a depth that is new and intriguing. Quite a bit of originality to this story.

### **The Devil's Condom** – by *Fred Jackel*

*Premise:* Sometimes the Devil just wants to be your pal. After all, he gets bored with the same old same old just like anybody else, or does he? When he offers you something free and wants nothing in return, not even your soul, is he being generous? Or diabolical?

*Rating:* (3\*) **Entertaining** – This short, whimsical tale shows you what a bastard the Devil can be even when he's in a good mood, or maybe especially when he's in a good mood. His sense of humour is something to be afraid of. Not only is this tale a wry take on the "be careful what you wish for" theme, it also offers a unique insight into the Devil's motivation. Frankly, it's nice to read a fresh approach to the conundrum of what makes the Devil so devilish. Well done.

### **Growing up with your Dead Sister** – by *Tais Teng*

*Premise:* A young girl loses her older sister but is relieved to find her ghost is hanging around eager to give advice on how to relate to boys. Unfortunately the older sister grows jealous, so effective is her mentoring, and begins to plot revenge.

*Rating:* (2\*) **Interesting** – This is a well-constructed story with a credible sad ending that reminds you that neither life, nor death it seems, is fair. In fact, the combination can make things worse, much worse, and horribly permanent. I don't know much about the life experience of young girls struggling to figure out how to relate to boys, as I had approached the task from the opposite point of view, with some measure of success, at least when compared to the younger sister in this story. I feel sorry for her. Her anguish, and my general sense of outrage over life's unfairness—what do you mean they didn't promise me a rose garden? Why the hell not?—pushes me away from the story. Not the author's fault. Rather a sign of how effective the story is. I shy away from stories which genuinely tug at my heart strings. Just an old softy beneath my curmudgeonly exterior I guess.

### **Full Spectrum** – by *Susan Pieters* – (Cdn – B.C.)

*Premise:* Patricia doesn't want to see a psychiatrist, but her employer insists. She goes along with this because she's the type of person who normally goes along with everything, all the while hating herself for having no free will of her own. The Psychiatrist reveals a simple way for Patricia to take charge of her life to an extraordinary degree. It begins with a small pill ...

*Rating:* (2\*) **Interesting** – This is one of those stories where you accept the impossible premise (never have more than one Isaac Asimov always said) and ride along as the author explores the implications. Trouble for me is that it is based on such an artificial concept (though an intriguing one) that I find it difficult to get "into" the story. Normally I love being drawn as if I were somehow present "witnessing" events, but the underlying concept is so unbelievable a construct that I find myself left outside. The ending is unexpected and has a bit of a twist to it, so it works and satisfies, but I guess I'm too literal minded to properly appreciate the story as a whole. Sorry about that.

## **The Cropper's Ball** – by *dvsduncan* – (Cdn – New Westminster, B.C.)

*Premise:* Traction engines, sort of like the old steam tractors but much, much bigger, prowl a difficult world where subsistence agriculture represents high living. Without the articles of trade these machines provide as they barter their way up and down the river valleys life would be even more miserable. Two months of the year these devices congregate at the one industrial yard capable of doing major overhauls and refits. Joachim, the somewhat inept apprentice mechanic aboard the *Euripides*, dreams of impressing a particular girl stationed on the *Boggle*, another traction engine, at the upcoming annual Croppers Ball. Alas, the rather formidable Woman commanding the *Euripides* demands he perform a task at the ball which reeks of dark intrigue, death, and disaster, not to mention risking an end to his love life which hasn't even begun.

*Rating:* (3\*) **Entertaining** – My only quibble is that this story has an ending which took me by surprise. The amount of detailed description devoted to the gathering of the traction engines and the culture of their crews I found totally absorbing, but the resolution didn't strike me as necessarily specific to that particular setting. A few hints inserted earlier in the story might have made it easier for me to accept. But, as I say, a quibble. Overall, I quite enjoyed the story.

## **Whole** – by *Joanna Leshner*

*Premise:* Vanessa, a teenage girl, still grieves for her recently deceased older brother, and begins to exhibit all the physical symptoms of a decaying corpse. Frantically she attempts to hide her deteriorating condition from her family and friends, but little things like her abdomen bursting open and spilling her entrails on the ground as she walks to the bus stop make her façade of normalcy increasingly difficult to maintain.

*Rating:* (2\*) **Interesting** – The story is probably symbolic of traditional teenage angst over personal appearance; something our sexist society encourages even in adults. I can't even begin to describe the story without giving away the ending, but can say the ending fits the story and justifies the premise. However, overall, I found the story a bit too surreal for my taste, found the premise just beyond the limit of what I'm willing to accept for the sake of a story. Maybe I'm squeamish. If so, this is rather odd because I love Lovecraftian horror (noteworthy for a unique ambience, to put it mildly), but that is lacking here because everything is described in matter-of-fact, realistic terms. Perhaps it is the realism which makes me uncomfortable. Too many memories of fretting over acne I suppose. In a sense the premise is more important than the plot, the description more relevant to the reader than the resolution. I have the feeling many women will find the story quite powerful. Too much for me though.

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## **ANTHOLOGIES**

**CASSEROLE DIPLOMACY** – Tyche Books (2014) – (Cdn) – [Find it here](#)

(Note: This is an anthology of stories which have appeared in ON SPEC Magazine.)

Edited by *Marianne O. Nielsen* – (Cdn) & *Diane L. Walton* – (Cdn – Yukon)

### **Contents:**



## Jubilee – by *Stephen Mills* – (Cdn – Burnaby, B.C.)



*Premise:* David is a Presbyterian minister noted for his less than inspiring sermons. This may be because his parishioners are less than inspiring. Ordinary folk all around, which is why the lamb materializing out of the floor during his sermon on turning water into a wine was a bit of a wakeup call. Especially when the lamb turned into a ball of dark slime which grabbed Mrs. Miller by the throat to lift her out of her pew. After that, things really began to get strange. Parishioners began to question what God was REALLY up to. So did David.

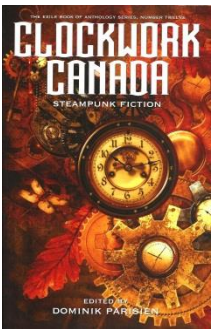
*Rating:* (3\*) **Entertaining** – What at first appears at first to be a light-hearted Lovecraftian tale evolves into an exploration of the very nature and function of the universe, resulting in a science fictional explanation for the goings on, and some philosophical questions. An amusing take on the popular “what if?” question: what if the universe isn’t what we think it is? You don’t want to know.

## No Such Thing as an Ex-Con – by *Holly Phillips* – (Cdn – Lower Mainland, B.C.)

*Premise:* Emily served time as an accessory to multiple murders. There was no actual evidence she’d been involved, merely the fact she knew exactly what happened and where the bodies were. Nobody believed she had witnessed the horror in her dreams. The actual killer’s claim he had never met her, never known her, meant nothing. She knew too much. Now that she’d been released, it was hard to create a new life for herself, especially since the old dreams kept returning. Then the police officer who had handled her “case” shows up. Turns out he is hoping for new dreams.

*Rating:* (3\*) **Entertaining** – The world is filled with fake psychics who fail to deliver on their promises. Therefore, isn’t it logical to assume that anyone who knows everything about a series of murders must be the murderer, or, at least, an accessory to the crimes? Dare a true psychic help the police? Or is the price too great? A conundrum I’ve not seen before, but quite logical when you think about it. Highly original, and a great source of tension. Adds depth to the story.

## CLOCKWORK CANADA – Exile Publications (2016) – (Cdn) – [Find it here](#)



Edited by *Dominik Parisien* – (Cdn – Toronto, Ontario) – (AAE 2017)

### Contents:

**La Clochemar** – by *Charlotte Ashley* – (Cdn – Toronto, Ontario) – (AAE 2017)

*Premise:* Suzette, a French poacher, had been exiled to the New World. She is now a runner. Whenever the gears of the community map indicate a monster has entered the district, the great Horned Serpent Mishiginebig for instance, it is her job to distract the gigantic, unkillable thing and draw it away from human habitation. Bad enough she can’t outrun such creatures and must find a place to hide when they’re about to catch up, a darn fool mapmaker has invented a pocket Clochemar which can track people as well as monsters. This has enormous political implications, none of them good.

*Rating:* (3\*) **Entertaining** – In defiance of Isaac Asimov’s rule there are TWO impossible things in the premise, namely the monsters and the clockwork map detection gizmos, but I like monsters and am willing to take them for granted, so all I really had to do was accept the map concept. Well, actually there’s a third

impossible thing, which I won't describe since it would give away too much, but others, more in tune with spiritual beliefs concerning human potential, will probably find it perfectly acceptable.

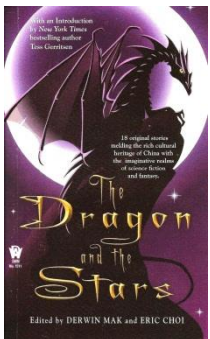
The plot and its resolution leaves a lesser impression on me than the setting, but that's okay because I really like the atmosphere of this story. Reminds me of the tales of the French Regime in Canada found in the 1954 classic *THE WHITE AND THE GOLD* by Thomas B. Costan, perhaps the definitive "intimate, living story of the making of Canada." I half expected to meet Champlain in the story, or maybe Frontenac. It has the right "feel" for the setting. Puts me in mind of the old Radisson TV series my brother and I watched in Ottawa when we were kids, a Quebec production we enjoyed even though it was on the French channel and neither of us understood French. Lots of scenes of Radisson running through the forest chasing or being chased by Iroquois warriors. Because of that series this story is somehow comfortably familiar. I enjoyed it.

### **East Wind in Carrall Street** – by *Holly Schofield* – (Cdn – Rural British Columbia) – (AAE 2017)

*Premise:* Wong Shin has brought shame upon his family, because he has grown too large to operate his Father's Dragon, too large to participate in his father's fraudulent scheme. Normally, of course, Dragon Dancers are carried by men. But Shin's father has invented a clockwork Dragon which dances by itself. Naturally the local merchants want to hire it to bring good luck and profit to the stores they own. It is operated from within by young Wong, and he can no longer fit inside securely hidden from view. If the Merchants discover the clockwork Dragon is fake, the Shin family will be ruined. What can be done to solve the problem?

*Rating: (3\*) Entertaining* – Since I live locally, a story set in Vancouver's Chinatown has great appeal. I like steampunk, and the solution to the problem being a merger of two culture's technologies I think is rather clever, a solution facilitated by Wong's forbidden love interest, the white kitchen maid serving in a nearby brothel. Everything gets neatly tied together, including an explanation of the significance of the "East Wind" in the title.

### **THE DRAGON AND THE STARS** – Daw Books, Inc. (2010) – [Find it here](#)



Edited by *Derwin Mak* – (Cdn – Toronto, Ontario) and *Eric Choi* – (Cdn – Toronto, Ontario)

**Contents:**

**Goin' Down to Anglotown** – by *William F. Wu*

*Premise:* Three LA college graduates, Ken Wong, Garth Endo, and Andy Fan, Asians all, decide to celebrate by going down to Anglotown to eat Anglo food in a small but quaint restaurant offering "Genuine Missouri Style Cuisine." Being bold and brave, they opt to order exotic peculiarities like meatloaf and chicken-fried steak. Their waitress, Cindy, is attractive in a pale sort of way, but seems uncomfortable when they ask if she thinks it is okay for a famous Asian actor to play a *bok gwai*, a white guy, character name of Philip Marlowe in an upcoming movie. Then they make the mistake of inquiring about the network of hidden tunnels rumoured to exist beneath Anglotown.

*Rating: (4\*) Great Fun* – There must be a gazillion old pulp fiction tales set in Chinatown, where opium addicts and white slavers presumably run amuck 24/7. This story neatly turns traditional racism upside down, portraying whites resentfully attempting to preserve their fading traditions but bowing to the necessity of catering to the Asian majority in order to make a living. A discussion on what is or isn't authentic Anglo cuisine

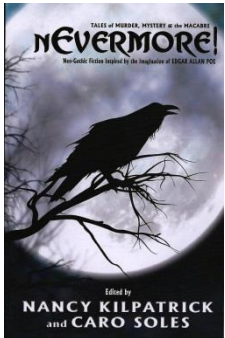
is hilarious. Pancakes with soy sauce, for instance. You're only fooling yourself if you think that's genuine Anglo food. The purpose of the story is to give whites a sense of what it's like to suffer from prejudice directed at minorities, and just when the reader is beginning to suspect the premise is merely a setup to make that point, along comes an ending which successfully concludes the story while at the same time reinforcing the premise. Well done I say. Should be mandatory reading for all the "colour-blind" white folk who keep insisting prejudice and mistreatment of minorities no longer exist. A question of perception. This story opens eyes.

### **The Polar Bear Carries the Mail** – by *Derwin Mak* – (Cdn – Toronto, Ontario)

*Premise:* Global warming has caused an ongoing methane release which has killed off life in Hudson's Bay. Fort Churchill, formerly famed for what are now extinct Polar Bears, has successfully reinvented itself by attracting Chinese investors to build a spaceport to fly Long March rockets fueled, in part, by methane. Unfortunately, a small group of environmental protestors have succeeded in delaying the first flight of a manned mission from the spaceport. The situation is tense, especially after a local employee at the Spaceport is murdered by one of the protestors.

*Rating:* (2\*) **Interesting** – The tension in the story is not dependent on the threat of further violence, but rather the question of how to counter bad *feng shui* enough to keep the Chinese investors from pulling out. The "Polar Bear" in the title is the name of the manned spacecraft waiting to launch. The mail is the most important element of the story relevant to its resolution. The story is logical and consistent within its premise, but frankly, I found it rather dull. Not sure if I like the ending or not. Seems a bit contrived. This story a bit too low key for my taste.

### **NEVERMORE!** – Edge SF&F Publishing (2015) – (Cdn) – [Find it here](#)



Edited by *Nancy Kilpatrick* (Cdn – Montreal, Quebec) and *Caro Soles* (Cdn)

#### **Contents:**

**Naomi** – by *Christopher Rice*

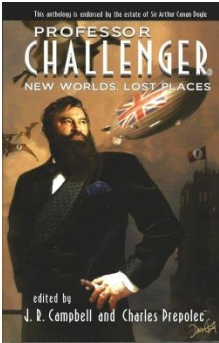
*Premise:* Mr. Franklin is a homosexual. Times are sufficiently advanced nobody cares. But his nephew/niece Nathan/Naomi is, or was, a Trannie, and Trannies are still fair game in High School these days, which was what drove her to suicide. The news media continue to pester Mr. Franklin, but not about Naomi. No. That's old news. They want to know his thoughts on the wave of suicides engulfing the bullies who drove her to her death. He doesn't want to share his thoughts. He desperately wants to avoid his thoughts but, of course, he can't.

*Rating:* (4\*) **Great fun** – This powerful story is based on Poe's *The Tell Tale Heart*, which I read so long ago I no longer remember what it was about. So, for me, *Naomi* stands on its own. This story is also depressing, but well told, full of subtle details that bring the characters to life in a few, telling words. The ending is quite clever, and unexpected, and a resolution of sorts, though I suppose them as remembers Poe's tale might have anticipated it.

So why have I rated it "Great fun?" Simple. Wanted to give it a four star rating. I don't mean to imply it is a gleeful, joyful, hilarious story to read. Far from it. The exact opposite, in fact. It is a very sad story, but packs an enormous punch, a heck of an impact. One of the best anti-bullying stories I've read. My rating system is based

on how much I enjoy a story. I didn't "enjoy" *Naomi*, but was mighty impressed by it. So a four star rating. Ignore the "Great fun" bit. *Naomi* blew me away, but not as entertainment. Heck of a cautionary tale.

**PROFESSOR CHALLENGER** – Edge SF&F Publishing (2015) – (Cdn) – [Find it here](#)



Edited by *J.R. Campbell* (Cdn ?)  
and *Charles Prepolec* (Cdn – Calgary Alberta)

**Contents:**

**The Crystal Minders** – by *John Takis* – (Michigan, USA)

*Premise:* Edward Malone, intrepid reporter and willing/unwilling sidekick of Professor Challenger, is astonished late one evening when a much-worse-for-the-wear Professor Summerlee staggers into the Daily Gazette's office with a tale to tell. Seems Challenger demanded Summerlee come along to visit a former acquaintance by name of Ackerman now residing at Stebbing Hall, a country estate in Essex. Ackerman and Challenger were enemies, having had a falling out in their youth over the little matter of living crystals discovered in a cave in France (which later collapsed). Turns out Ackerman has discovered how to grow the crystals into functioning replacements of human limbs and organs. Now the damn fool has cultured a thing infinitely worse.

*Rating: (4\*) Great Fun* – There's something very Victorian about a science fictional exploration of natural crystals as the key to futuristic technology. Today's high-tech tends to build on previous advances, but this story deals with first-stage technology based on a break-through study of an entirely new natural phenomena roughly equivalent to the discovery of electricity or radiation. A genuine throwback to the spirit of the times in which the story is set. Helps make the story curiously credible and convincing. Love the title too. Sounds like one H.G. Wells would come up with.

**King of the Moon** – by *Lawrence C. Connally*

*Premise:* As we all know, Mr. Bedford and Mr. Cavor went to the Moon. Mr. Bedford came home alone. Being a crass opportunist he peddled his tale to one Mr. Wells. There the matter ended. For a while. Then Bedford met Ann, Cavor's niece and heir. Apparently Cavor kept notes in his lab. With the aid of Jimmy Major and Jimmy Minor (both inventors), Ann and Bedford soon cobble together another sphere and rise to the Moon to rescue Cavor should he still be alive. They bring Professor Challenger on the assumption that the Selenites, if their race still exists, will stand in awe of him and do his bidding. Tidy little theory.

*Rating: (4\*) Great Fun* – The premise of this tale is "absolutely imperial," as Cavor was wont to say. Definitely a "ripping good yarn." There's a not a lot original to be found, in that it is a return to a setting and experience of some nostalgia to many readers, but charming and enjoyable precisely because of that. You CAN go home again, so to speak. At the same time the implications of the "what if?" scenario of Cavor remaining, living, and working on (or rather "in") the Moon are worked out to gleeful advantage. My only complaint is that the fate of the Selenite bus driver is not fully worked out. Perhaps best not to know.

## **SECOND CONTACTS** – Bundoran Books (2015) – (Cdn) – [Find it here](#)



Edited by **Michael Rimar** – (Cdn – Whitby, Ontario)  
and **Hayden Trenholm** – (Cdn – Ottawa, Ontario)

### **Contents:**

#### **Soil of Truth** – by **Nicole Lavigne** – (Cdn – Ottawa, Ontario)

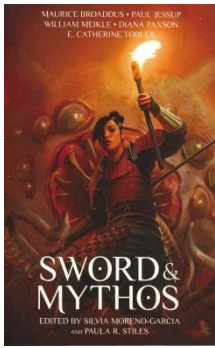
*Premise:* Osaeba is a plant. A female plant. An intelligent female plant serving aboard the colony ship under her mentor, Jaendther, one of the Masters old enough to remember their home world. They've been in space, along with hundreds of other Frondulae, for a very long time. Hence the excitement as their ship approaches a world suitable for colonization. To their astonishment, they are greeted by an already established Frondulae colony. Eagerly, the Masters descend to the planet's surface, Osaeba accompanying them. The Masters find the new world successfully settled, its inhabitants delighted at the prospect of fresh sap, so to speak. Only Osaeba notices something is awry, perhaps dangerously awry.

*Rating:* (3\*) **Entertaining** – This is a delightfully old-fashioned story, like something written in the '50s, or even earlier. A great deal of care is taken to convincingly depict an alien ecology and way of life, and to a degree, an alien way of thinking in terms of preconceptions and priorities. Much of the plot hinges on Osaeba's reluctance to inform the Masters about her suspicions. At first this struck me as a bit artificial, or convenient, from the writer's point of view, but then, remembering certain episodes of the TV documentary series *Mayday* describing spectacularly fatal airliner crashes that were brought about by the co-pilot's trained instinct not to override the Captain's decisions, even when the co-pilot knows the Captain is making a fatal mistake, it struck me that Osaeba's hesitation and self-doubt were perfectly explicable for any intelligent species with a strongly rooted chain of command. So I sat back and enjoyed the rising tension as Osaeba struggled to understand what was going on and what to do about it.

#### **Wash Away on Fiant Lux** – by **Robin Wyatt Dunn**

*Premise:* The aliens came, as invaders, and much of humanity is dead. The main character, by name of Odens, lives in L.A. suburbia, or in what's left of it. He absorbs information, records it, then transmits it. Seems his brain is wired that way. It also appears he is insane, but he doesn't mind, having learned to live with it, just as he's learned to live with the aliens. The problem is the squad of human soldiers taking refuge in his house. They're kind of disruptive.

*Rating:* (2\*) **Interesting** – This story is the exact opposite of the previous story. It's very modern, somewhat experimental, and rather surreal. Being very literal-minded, I had a bit of difficulty figuring out what was going on. Kind of a prose poem, really, like something Philip K. Dick might have written in his later years, had he been feeling optimistic that day. Humans vs. aliens. There seems to be a third force at work, something older than the first two, and Odens is its vanguard, if I interpret the story correctly. Something vaguely Lovecraftian is happening, possibly to humanity's salvation, or at least continued survival. Then again, maybe it is just a glimpse into the mind of a man driven insane by catastrophe. Either way, it's a trifle "artsy" for my pedestrian tastes, but intriguing. However, I have no idea what the title means. I have my suspicions, but I've already demonstrated enough density of mind, so I'll just let it slide.



Edited by *Silvia Moreno-Garcia* – (Cdn – Vancouver, B.C.) & *Paula R. Stiles*

**Contents:**

**Truth is Order and Order is Truth** – by *Nadia Bulkin*

*Premise:* Dhani is the rightful Queen of Alunijo, seat of a mighty empire. But her younger brothers don't agree, nor does the new King, the former Prime Minister, Jaya Megalong. Her father, the former King, can't help her, having been trampled by an elephant, and her mother, the beautiful Dyah, said to be either a witch or a demon, had passed away after a lingering illness. Dhani has no hope but to lead a ragtag band of followers through the jungle to the southern sea and rouse the inhabitants of Jungkuno, the city from whence her parents came, to help her regain her throne. Problem is, does Jungkuno even exist?

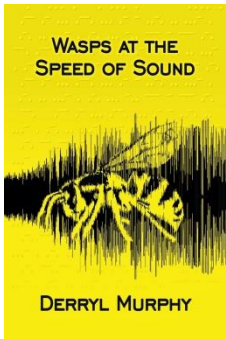
*Rating:* (2\*) **Interesting** – Bits of description here and there led me to suspect the setting is loosely based on the Khmer Empire of Cambodia. Fair enough, an under-utilized historical setting worthy of being transformed into fantasy fiction. Not to give too much away, but a Lovecraftian element intrudes, one that makes sense given the locale of some of Lovecraft's tales. The title refers to the Queen's assumption of divine right based on personal obsession. She has power because she IS power. All must bend to her will. Call it "Lovecraft meets Machiavelli." It's difficult to identify with so ruthless and uncaring an individual, but she can't help it; it's in her blood. At first she just wants to get to Jungkuno and take back her throne. Later, a more disturbing obsession begins. Then her people REALLY begin to suffer.

Normally I like Lovecraftian tales, which often tend to be rather slow in building tension and suspense, but this one was a bit TOO slow to develop. Not enough emphasis on concerns about the true nature of her parents, perhaps, or maybe too many flashbacks for my taste, or a curiously remote and offhand style of describing violent scenes which lessened the impact of the "action." A quiet, dreamlike addition to the Lovecraft mythos.

**Spirit Forms of the Sea** – by *Bogi Takacs*

*Premise:* The Magyars are a steppe people, nomads and warriors at heart, but the Táltos, the shamans, are the true strength of the tribe, for it is they who are armed with spirit animals. Every now and then a Táltos from another tribe issues a challenge. Then the spirit animals duel. Young Réka shows signs of being a powerful Táltos, but has not yet found her spirit animal. The brave warrior Delin is chosen to escort her to a seaside city in Croatia to help her find whatever beast awaits her.

*Rating:* (3\*) **Entertaining** – This tale is told mostly in the form of a prolonged flashback, which is a structure I find easier to get into than a whole series of flashbacks as in the previous story reviewed. Too many flashbacks tend to disorient me, or at least fragment my focus, to the extent of driving me out of the story. Here I was quite comfortable. I also enjoyed the premise and the setting. Never read a story about Magyars feeling overwhelmed by big city life in Croatia before. Nomads vs. City Dwellers nothing new in fiction, to put it mildly, but it feels fresh. And the task Delin has to perform to earn enough money to enable them to stay in the city a little longer reflects literally thousands of years of traditional lore, yet provides an ending which satisfactorily ties everything together in an original manner. Good story.



All stories by *Derryl Murphy* – (Cdn – Saskatoon, Saskatchewan)

**Contents:**

**Day's Hunt**

*Premise:* Davies is a harpooner serving aboard the whaling vessel *Ew York Tim* sometime in the far future when the oceans are crowded with the garbage of centuries and the only technology to be had depended on whatever you dredge up from the bottom of the ocean. Residual radiation is a bad thing, what with everyone developing more and more tumors as they age, but at least the mutant whales are tasty, if difficult to catch. Besides, whale meat makes a refreshing change from the centuries-old bits of food floating amid the garbage.

*Rating:* (3\*) **Entertaining** – Ever resourceful, mankind endures on its own garbage, especially since the garbage has developed a renewable ecology of its own. Darn good thing, too, considering the natural ecology of old has long since disappeared. Derryl has a lot of fun running with this decidedly odd retelling of *Moby Dick*. More of a vignette than a story; the scene is the thing. A warning tale of sorts, I suppose, but mostly just a bit of fun.

**Wasps at the Speed of Sound**

*Premise:* If a wasp flies at you it'll go right through you. In fact, all insects have developed exaggerated natural powers. Fireflies can hit sub-light speeds. Ant lions can strip you to the bone in a flash. Abe wears home-made armour when he sneaks up on the nests with his home-made flame thrower. Even his country home is home-made, having been converted into a somewhat bug proof shelter. His buddy Mike helps him kill bugs. Then Ryan shows up, an electronics salesman who claims the bugs communicate with him in Morse code. Turns out the bugs are up to something, and those few humans who survive should take advantage of it. Trouble is, not much time left.

*Rating:* (2\*) **Interesting** – This story put me in mind of this or that bug film, including the one where bugs spell out messages with their bodies, but nevertheless Derryl's tale is an original take on the theme of bugs gone mad, or nature's revenge if you will. Turns out it's not revenge at all. Humans merely happen to be in the way. Why bugdom has developed super powers (including intelligence) is explained, but I'm a little unclear on why they make so limited use of their newfound abilities. I enjoyed the story, but the premise didn't quite jell for me. Too much like a B movie, I guess. Great title though.

**WRESTLING WITH GODS** – Edge SF&F Publishing (2015) – (Cdn) – [Find it here](#)

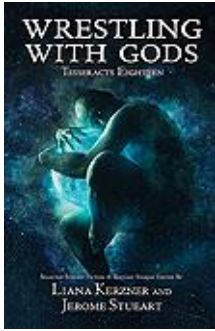
Edited by *Liana Kerzner* – (Cdn) & *Jerome Stueart* – (Cdn – Yukon)

**Contents:**

**A Cut and a Prayer** – by *Janet K. Nicolson* – (Cdn – Regina, Saskatchewan)

*Premise:* A young, devout Moslem woman can no longer feel Allah's presence. Her faith is intact, her knowledge of Islam profound, yet she feels a great emptiness as if she's lost contact with Allah, as if she is no

longer able to serve Allah's purpose. So, she opts for nano implants which "remove a little off the top" by altering her brain chemistry to allow her to become more open to God. There are side effects, however.



*Rating: (2\*) Interesting* – Stories revolving around questions of wavering religious faith hold little interest for me. In this case the faith remains intact, but the woman seems to have developed what amounts to an immunity against it. Nano chemistry restores the balance, though not quite. This raises questions concerning the nature of faith. It seems to me Islam has always rejected alcohol in the belief that it inhibits the faithful from understanding the beauty and logic of Allah's word with sufficient clarity and comprehension to possess genuine faith. How, then, would a medical technique which artificially enhances the mind's ability to focus with absolute clarity and serene comprehension fit into Allah's intentions? Would the resulting level of faith be deemed genuine? Or false? I, personally, being an

Atheist, don't care, but I can see how the premise of the story poses a conundrum for the truly devout. The advancement of technology and science presumably threatens the dogma and tenets of many religions, not just Islam. An ongoing threat, or temptation, which won't go away anytime soon. How can religious faith cope? In my case, not being a believer, it doesn't matter, so I found the story vaguely interesting but of no personal concern. For people of faith, the premise of the story is relevant and probably somewhat disturbing. I'll leave it to them to define the correct solution.

### **Under the Iron Rain** – by *John Park* – (Cdn – Ottawa, Ontario)

*Premise:* There's been some sort of world war, with humanity reduced to near dark age levels of technology, yet fire continues to rain down from the heavens, seemingly at random, and everyone fears the light of impact. Jason, one of the few remaining metal workers, finds the impact craters useful sources of shattered metal, and sometimes something more. Smuggling one such discovery into "the city," he hopes to rescue his daughter from the ranks of the sacred prostitutes whose Goddess shields the city from heaven's punishment which, unfortunately, his daughter is rather looking forward to.

*Rating: (3\*) Entertaining* – A thoughtful piece combining the chicanery of ancient religion, a dysfunctional family, and the likely state of civilization after the next world war. Seems as plausible a glimpse of the future as any. Some very nice touches, like "He had forgotten the smells of a city: smoke, dung, incense ..." Yep. That's what cities used to smell like, before the 19<sup>th</sup> century or thereabouts. A good many slums in the world still smell that way. In fact, when I think about it, that's pretty much what cities have always been throughout most of history ... massive slums. I guess that's the message of hope in this story, continuity, no matter what. Especially when it comes to convoluted, petty concerns. We'll always be human, never mind how much our circumstances are reduced. Is that a good thing? I guess so.

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## **NOVELS**

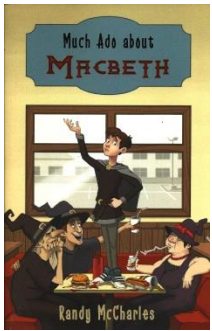
### **MUCH ADO ABOUT MACBETH** – Tyche Books (2015) – [Find it here](#)

By *Randy McCharles* – (Cdn – Calgary, Alberta)

*Premise:* High School Drama teacher Paul Samson decides the students should perform MacBeth. He is reminded it is infamously cursed. He doesn't believe in curses. But the three witches responsible for bewitching the play ever since it was written most certainly do. Fortunately they're a bit bored, and rather lazy. The curse doesn't amount to much. Till the Gorgon shows up. Well, not literally a Gorgon. The head of the PTA, Mrs.



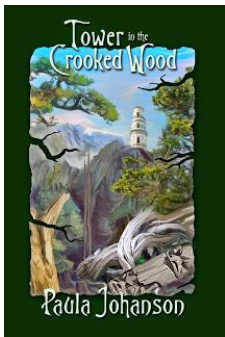
Caldwell, who is out to put an end to this “satanic” production. Still, Samson is clever. He figures he can win. Then supernatural elements begin to intrude and only Paul can see them. Kind of hard to teach when you’re convinced you’re going insane. The witches are annoyed. The manifestations are not of their doing. Something darker seems to be at work, something genuinely evil. Now the kid’s very lives may be at risk.



**Rating: (4\*) Great Fun.** This is a very pleasant romp. It’s not a realistic novel, the teenagers aren’t nearly as angst-ridden as real ones, and I’d say it is more situation-driven than character-driven. Nothing wrong with that when you’re spinning an entertaining tale. And I would have rated it as such, given it a “(3\*)” and noted it was well worth reading if all you wanted to do was smile and chuckle for a few hours. But in my High School days, having once played Father Barrett in ‘The Barretts of Wimpole Street’ and stunned the audience (they gasped) with my ferocity, not to mention my “Daughter” when I hurled her to the stage floor (got a bit carried away), I found myself nodding in appreciation and nostalgia over this or that item of business. Still, I was resigned to a predictable ending and figured, the witches being a bit too obsessed with fast food, overall it was loads of fun but not quite great fun. Then came the ending. Blew me away. Diabolically clever. Brilliant. Put a smile on my lips. In hindsight everything builds relentlessly towards it to the point of making the novel all of a piece. Which is why I upgraded my rating to “Great Fun.” A seamless whole, unlike many a good tale ruined by weak endings. Not what happened here. I was quite taken with the ending. I’m sure you can tell.

**TOWER IN THE CROOKED WOOD** – Five Rivers Publishing (2014) – [Find it here](#)

By *Paula Johanson* – (Cdn – Victoria, B.C.)



**Premise:** Jenia is a 19 year-old arborist in her wattle & daub village in the narrow valley. One night she and her siblings are stolen by magic to work in a poisoned land to build a concrete road for an evil wizard. Her brother breathes lime dust and dies. Transported a day later back to her village she sets out on a quest to find the wizard and enact her revenge. Her journey is somewhat handicapped by frequent magic returns to the wizard’s building sites to work as a whip-driven slave yet again and again. She finds this distracting.

**Rating: (3\*) Entertaining.** At first I found this difficult to get into you. I’m literal-minded, or simple-minded, or less than minded, or something. A linear plot is what I like best, because that way I drift along with the flow like an invisible presence accompanying the protagonist. (Just occurs to me, I rely on authors to create my rich fantasy life. Left to my own devices my fantasy life would be poor indeed.) In this novel early chapters sometimes refer to things not yet described or even mentioned till someone says something like “There is no tower.” A declaration like that confuses me, pulls me out of the tale being told. Immediately I ask “What tower? Who said anything about a tower?” Maybe, as a reader, I’m supposed to, but I prefer a process of revelation devoid of blatant hints of flashbacks to come. Felt as if I were being given a glimpse of the author’s working plotline rather than viewing the finished work.

That said the lush description of setting kept me reading further. It is “obviously” based on the west coast and offshore islands of British Columbia. You can tell from the description of sea wrack that Paula has walked along the beach many a time. She brings the setting vividly to life, as she does the way of life of the inhabitants of a village of wooden longhouses by the shore which put me in mind of a famous non-fiction book titled “The Adventures of Captain Jewett among the Nootka” who, being the one man spared after the Nootka murdered the crew of a trading vessel whose metal fittings they coveted, became a slave for a number of years till he was able to make his escape. The natives of this village are presented in near utopian terms, though there are veiled references to slavery and tribal warfare (part of west coast culture in B.C.) to maintain a subtle balance. Overall

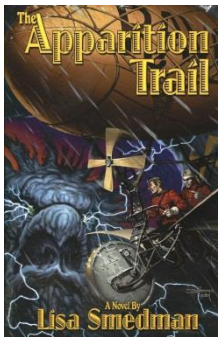
the villager's way of life appears superbly adapted to the environment (also historically true of west coast tribes) and their closeness to nature is an ally against evil wizardry. Natural magic VS. unnatural magic.

This is, I believe, a YA novel, so Jenia's tendency to forge ahead despite her confusion and ignorance of what is actually going on, a victim of life determined to gain the upper hand by being better than those who disdain her, probably resonates with many a teenager. After a few chapters, when enough needful information was finally provided to render clear the nature of her quest, I settled in to enjoy her interaction with other characters, especially Ronay, the Captain of the Guard from a medieval Hold, whose mission is to capture her and bring her back to tend neglected orchards, but whose love for her enmeshes him deeper and deeper into her quest absolutely against his will. Their relationship parries and thrusts are probably another thing teenagers can identify with, and to a somewhat worldly adult is both nostalgic and amusing.

However one complaint I have is that the villain is a distant, unknowable force rather than a character. Seems like the opportunity to truly make a crumb out of the wizard Krummholz has been missed. He is never fully explained. The reader never gets to know him. On the other hand, it's hard to see how he could be built up, given that Jenia never interacts with him. Besides, the entire novel is strictly Jenia's point of view. Her quest is a kind of crusade against evil, an evil perhaps meant to reflect the difficulties every teenager confronts when attempting to enter the adult world. Defining that evil and consequently shifting the focus away from Jenia from time to time might lessen the impact of the book on its younger readers. I'm pretty sure the readers are supposed to identify with Jenia, and not Krummholz (always a problem if your villain is a strong character), so I figure Paula deliberately chose not to explain his motivation or elaborate his character. Since I am of the opinion the novel does work and will please its intended audience, I'd have to say Paula was right to make this choice.

**THE APPARITION TRAIL** – Tesseract Books/Hades Publications/Edge Books (2014) – [Find it here](#)

By *Lisa Smedman* – (Cdn – Vancouver, B.C.)



*Premise:* In 1877 a large comet strikes the Moon and alters its speed of rotation. Slowly the traditional face slips away and a more heavily cratered, previously unknown face begins to appear. All at once there are breakthroughs in the sciences of perpetual motion and the paranormal. Corporal Marmaduke Grayburn of the North West Mounted Police (as the Royal Canadian Mounted Police were then known) appreciates steam power being replaced by perpetual engines, especially in the realm of flying machines, but is a bit slow on the uptake in observing the mystical beliefs of the prairie Indians taking concrete form. Seems everyone's former "magic" is becoming real. Settlers begin disappearing. The Manitou stone is missing. And what's with the resurgence of Buffalo herds roaming the land? Something odd is afoot. Something dangerous.

*Rating:* (4\*) **Great Fun.** This delightful mystery is solidly grounded on historical research. Every major character, from Chief Poundmaker to Old Man Stone, from Wandering Spirit to Four Finger Pete, even Grayburn himself, were alive in 1884, their paths intertwined. Only Arthur Chambers is fictional, but he is typical of the members of his quite genuine Society of Psychical Research (founded in 1882). Even the sacred boulder, the Manitou Stone, is real, stolen by a Methodist Missionary (one of the first people to disappear in this novel) and eventually shipped to a Methodist Church back east where it still resides. (They should give it back, methinks.) The legendary Sam Steele—the most famous "Mountie" of all time—forms a paranormal investigation unit and both Grayburn and Chambers join the team, much to their peril.

I'm a sucker for "what if?" alternate history novels and this is a good one. Grayburn, despite his inborn precognitive powers, is reluctant to accept the existence of the "new" magic—devout shamans being able to

literally transform into their spirit animals for instance—but his own logic and common sense, not to mention confrontations with said spirit critters, leads him inexorably deeper and deeper into a complex conspiracy threatening the lives of every settler if it succeeds, and the lives of every native Indian if it fails. Reminiscent of the famous “Ghost Dance Religion,” a new cult is uniting previously warring tribes to common purpose, only in this case prophecy will be made very real if it is not stopped in time. Much attention is paid to the historical attitudes of both whites and Indians, in bringing their mental culture (assumptions, misunderstandings, justifications, etc.) to life, and this aids the overall impression of authenticity. So much so I think it would make excellent required reading in High Schools, in part because it portrays the reality of the period very well (albeit subliminally beneath the magic), and because it’s a ripping good yarn. Enjoyed reading it. Loads of fun.

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## AFTERWORDS

In a recent online discussion I was taken to task for daring to give out advice on how to appeal to an editor when submitting a short story. I thought I was addressing a “newbie,” but it turned out I was addressing a professional. Essentially, if I interpreted comments correctly, I was accused of not taking the efforts of beginning authors seriously and thus belittling and betraying them. Or something.

Well, of course, I founded my semi-pro fiction zine Polar Borealis precisely in order to give beginning authors an opportunity to make a sale, perhaps their first sale. Since, apart from donations, I am funding the bulk of the cost from my own pocket and derive no income from “sales” (the zine is free to download), and have so far published 41 short stories and 30 poems in three issues, I figure I’ve earned the right to give my opinion about what it takes to please an editor, or, at least, what it takes to please this particular editor.

But, at the same time, I made it clear I am a “nobody.” By that I mean I’m not a professional. I’m just a retired warehouseman who happens to be a life-long SF fan and whose current hobby consists of reading, promoting, and publishing Canadian SpecFic literature. I figure it can’t hurt, in that anything I can do to turn modern readers on to the current explosion of Canadian creativity has got to be useful one way or another.

At the same time, given my ignorance of grammar, and my inability to critique a manuscript in a precise, academic manner, I’m strictly an amateur, a dilettante, who is doing this entirely for the fun of it. I’m afraid I’m a hopeless case. I find Canadian SpecFic great fun. Not to mention entertaining, intriguing, and every now and then quite stunning, in terms of stirring my sense of wonder and opening my eyes to new concepts. This is why I find the books and magazines quite addictive. Who needs drugs? Nobody, not when you can explore the imagination of gifted writers.

Am I a gifted amateur? More like a relentless amateur. I’m going to carry on with my hobby no matter what criticism comes my way. I’m having too much fun to give up.

What if I were to win the lottery big time? Buy a castle in Spain? Might get a condo. But mainly, I’d publish Polar Borealis more often and pay SFWA level rates. That’s the kind of dream I dream.

And I’d still plug away at OBIR and the CSFFA newsletter Auroran Lights. And maybe, just maybe, write that novel ...

When you get right down to it, I’m just a reader, but hey, readers know what they like. Anything that appeals to me is bound to appeal to people just like me. That’s a good thing, I think. I hope.