

PARSEC Meeting Schedule

December 2004

Date: December 11th 2004 - 2 PM
Topic: Holiday Party
Location: Ann Cecil's house in Dormont
(More on page 7)

January 2005

Date: January 8th 2005 - 2 PM
Topic: Art Show and Tell
Location: East Liberty Branch of Carnegie Library

February 2005

Date: February 12th 2005 - 2 PM
Topic: Rene Kruse of the Mon Valley Ghost
Research Society
Location: Allegheny Branch of Carnegie Library

March 2005

Date: March 12th 2005 - 2 PM
Topic: Confluence Topics
Location: Allegheny Branch of Carnegie Library

Special Holiday Illustrations

Cover Illustration by Phiz from Charles Dickens' *The Pickwick Papers*

Page 8 Illustration by Arthur Rackham from Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*

Page 11 Illustration by Ernest Shepard from Kenneth Grahame's *Wind in the Willows*

PARSEC

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

President - Kevin Geiselman

Vice President - Kevin Hayes

Treasurer - Greg Armstrong

Secretary - Bill Covert

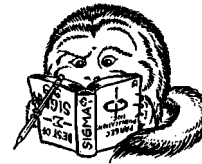
Commentator - Ann Cecil

Website: <http://www.parsec-sff.org>

Meetings - Second Saturday of every month.

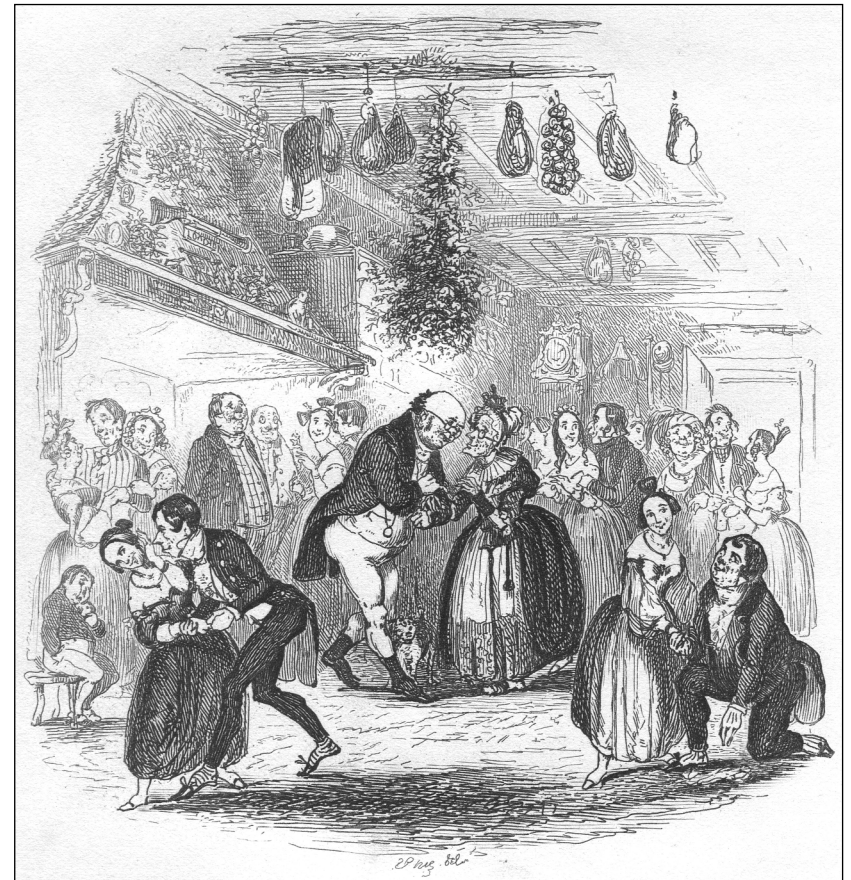
Dues: \$10 full member, \$2 Supporting member

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



SIGMA

The Newsletter of PARSEC • December 2004 • Issue 225



*It's December - Time for
the Parsec Holiday Party!*



View From the Top

The President's Column - Kevin Geiselman

Get Out!

My first draft of this column turned into a vitriolic essay on how the Christmas holiday season starts as far back as mid-October. I threw it away figuring that sort of tirade was best saved for my weblog (geis.blogspot.com). This left me wanting for another topic so I turned to something else that's been on

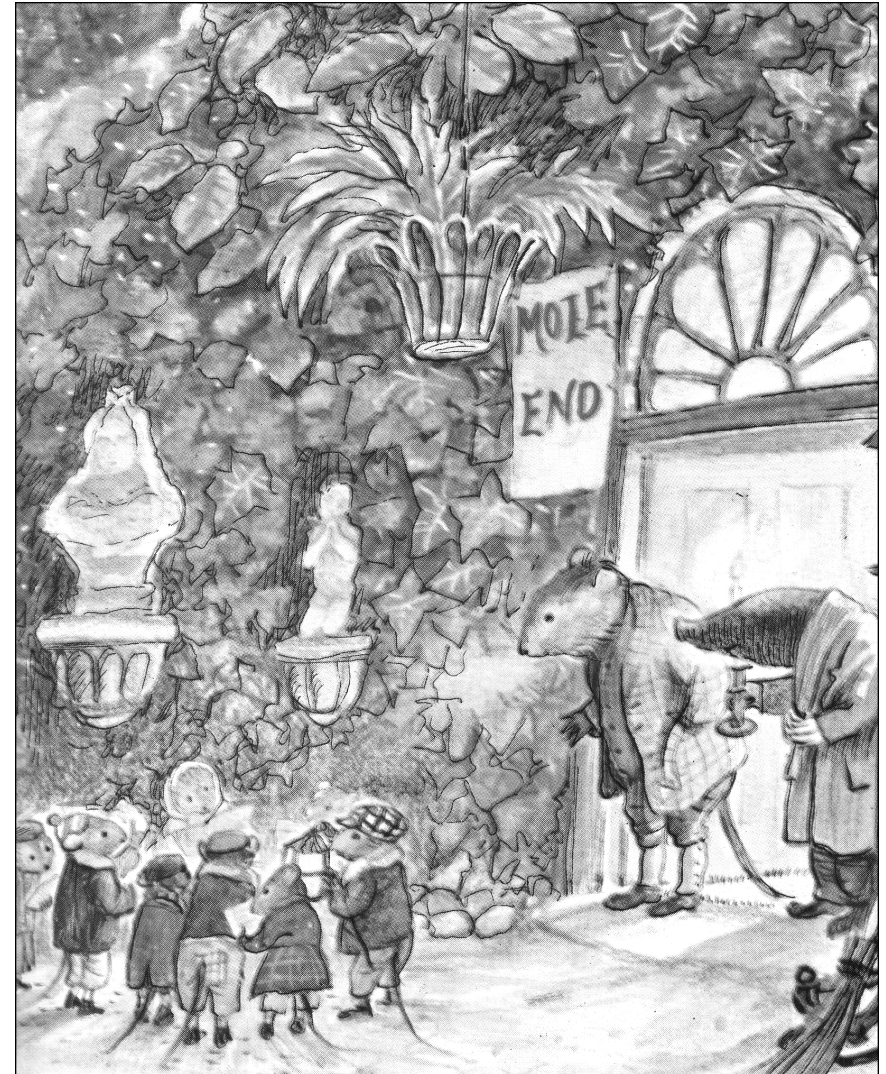
my mind lately: being outdoors.

You might not think that the start of winter would be the time to start thinking of being outdoors but in the winter you have to put more preparation into being outside. Getting outside in the summer is easy; T-shirt, shorts and go. But as the weather starts getting colder I have to start paying attention to the weather reports before my bicycle commute into work. When the temperature gets into the 40s, the facemask and gloves go on to prevent windburn. In the 30s I'll put on a sweatshirt under the jacket. I'll wear the bike shorts down into the 20s.

Winter is also the time to think about the outdoor things that I didn't get a chance to do earlier in the year. I wanted to get through hiking the 70 miles of the Laurel Highlands Hiking Trail but I only had the chance to do 30 miles of it. I wanted to ride more bike trails as well, the Allegheny River Trail, Ghost Town Trail and the Superhighway Trail built out of 11 miles of abandoned PA turnpike. So long as there isn't any snow, I see no reason for mere low temperatures to keep me from continuing to add miles throughout the winter. Even so, the hiking and biking I was able to do while the weather was nice were logged at LocalHikes.com and earned me a gift certificate towards outdoor gear at their on-line store. I was surprised at how much the gift certificate was for and realized it would have been for twice as much if I had done as much hiking and biking as I had wanted to do.

That gift certificate is buying me some leg warmers (and other stuff) so that I can continue to ride my bike to work as the temperature drops even lower. Other items have me looking forward to next year. A section of the Allegheny Highlands Trail will be completed some time in the spring, allowing a much easier bicycle connection for my ride to DC, and the Laurel Highlands Trail is still out there.

So, during the winter dark when you're curled up with a blanket and a good book, I might just be out there answering the call of the wilderness. Maybe you should open your ears and see if you can't hear nature calling you as well. The winter drives the timid indoors so you'll have that much more opportunity to hear her whispering to you.



It was a pretty sight, and a seasonable one, that met their eyes when they flung the door open. In the forecourt, lit by the dim rays of a horn lantern, some eight or ten little fieldmice stood in a semicircle, red worsted comforters round their throats, their fore-paws thrust deep into their pockets, their feet jiggling for warmth.



Notes From the Maintenance Department

The Editor's Columns - David Brody

I recently listened to a BBC radio adaptation of Yvegeny Zamyatin's dystopian masterpiece, *We*, a book that inspired George Orwell in the creation of *1984* the greatest science fiction novel ever written.

It occurred to me as I was listening, that most of the famous 20th century visions of totalitarian futures, inspired by the example of Leninist Russia, depicted the victory of radical rationalism. Ironically, the looming truth of fascism as it may soon exist in America, is that of radical irrationalism, the dominance of religious intolerance. A final repudiation of the Age of Reason.

Perhaps I'm being paranoid. I don't believe so. Religious extremists, convinced that they were responsible for George Bush's reelection, are demanding the implementation of their decidedly undemocratic agenda: No freedom of choice, public funding of religion, the teaching of creationism to our children. These plus the Patriot Act plus a censorship - mad FCC equals fascism. The equation is simple.

Don't get me wrong. I, like so many on the left who were made to feel like Pharisees by right wing finger pointers, consider myself to be a rather devout committed family man. So do many other blue-staters. The truth is that Massachusetts has the lowest divorce rate in the nation and my home town of Brooklyn has more churches per capita than anywhere else in the country. (Yes, even more than Pittsburgh.)

What I and others believe is that spirituality takes many forms, all of them legitimate and that even atheism has its place. That's what Thomas Jefferson and the founders had in mind. In fact, Jefferson himself practiced a non-traditional form of worship. Today he might have been a pariah.

Pay attention. Be prepared to act. Freedom is worth fighting for.

This is my second holiday season as the editor of Sigma and it's been a joy. The last two or three issues have been a bit rushed because of an ongoing illness that I think I'm near beating, but in the new year I hope I can get back to focusing on improving the newsletter's content and continuing to encourage the widest possible range of submissions. As the rant that opened this column proves, I don't feel any limitations on my own self expression and I hope other contributors won't either.



Reviews

Books

The Green and the Gray

by Timothy Zahn

TOR hardcover, 2004

reviewed by Ann Cecil

The Green and the Gray is a fantasy novel set in and around modern-day New York City, but it is a New York with unexpected layers.

On a cold night, Roger and Caroline Whittier are coming home from a play, when the streetlights begin to flicker and fail in odd patterns. A strange, dwarfishly short man with a shiny gun forces them into an alley and bids them take care of an injured 12-year girl. They get her home, and call 911 but when the cops arrive, the girl has vanished from their bedroom.

Slowly, Roger and Caroline learn that New York has been home for the last 75 years to some really odd refugees; two groups, one calling themselves Greens, and one Grays, who came here from another world. One group has 'powers' and the other has hi-tech gadgets; enemies on their home world, they have carried their feud here. The girl is the focus of the struggle, in a twisted way. Factions within the two groups are planning to use measures to end the struggle that will incidentally wipe out a lot of innocent by-standers: all of New York City's inhabitants.

As Roger and Caroline, normal humans with no special powers, try valiantly to understand what's going on and find help to cope with the struggle and prevent the fatal battle, they also have to cope with some major marital miscommunications of their own. They find an ally in a tough New York cop, along with members of both Greens and Grays who want a peaceful solution to their struggle. In the final scenes, Roger has a surprising insight that changes the perspective for both sides, and allows a wrap-up without too much bloodshed.

Zahn does action well (he's written a number of Star Wars novels) and handles military actions with expertise (he also wrote a number of Cobra novels). He writes convincingly of Roger and Caroline's marital discord; all his characters are interesting, and the narrative is surprisingly compelling, even though several of the plot twists were fairly obvious to me.

Recommended.

Dragon and Soldier

by Timothy Zahn
A Starscape book from TOR, hardcover, 2004
reviewed by Ann Cecil

Dragon and Soldier is the second book in a YA series, called the Dragonback Adventure. The first book was *Dragon and Thief*, which introduced 14 year-old Jack Morgan. Jack's folks are dead, and he was raised by Uncle Virgil, a conman/thief who died about a year ago, but left the boy with a spaceship run by a computer that has Uncle Virgil's personality uploaded. In book one, Jack was salvaging a ruined alien spaceship when a semi-parasitic life form, the K'da poet warrior Draycos picked Jack as a new host. In the first book, Jack and Draycos managed an uneasy alliance that wound up fixing several of Jack's financial and legal problems.

In this book, Jack sets out to return the favor and help Draycos find out who has conspired to destroy his people. Given that a mercenary spaceship ruined Draycos' spaceship, Jack decides to join up with the nearest mercenary operation, figuring that he can get a look at their records and see not only what kind of ships they use, but also what they have on the competition. Mercenaries turn out to be less than honorable groups. The plan to get into the records develops more complications, not the least of which is a mysterious adolescent girl, who clearly has an interest in Jack. Just what kind of interest is not at all clear -- but that adds to the fun.

This book is extremely well written; I found it engrossing and altogether charming. Zahn has a good time taking shots at the society that allows children to be recruited for armies, let alone promote thievery at many levels. This book, like the first, has much the flavor of Heinlein's juveniles: a hero who is bright, capable, but woefully inexperienced (i.e., a believable 14), but who is involved in a fast-moving, complex plot, with a nice balance of action and thought. Draycos gets some point of view scenes, and we see an alien view of Human society, again, nicely done without being overdone or trite.

Highly recommended.

Movies & Television

The Incredibles

reviewed by David Brody

At last Americans are doing animation for grownups. The Japanese and even Europeans have been doing it for decades and it's about time we Yanks set aside the fixed notion that cartoons are just for kids. *The Incredibles* (from Pixar, written and directed by Brad Bird) is the best computer generated feature film I've ever seen. It's literate, well written and has engaging,

November Minutes

Ann Cecil



PARSEC met on November 13th, 2004 at the Allegheny branch of the Carnegie Free Library. For those who don't remember, the lecture room is the all red number on the third floor at the head of a long curvy flight of stairs.

The meeting was the annual book sale and voting meeting. The sale started with a selling war: President Kevin Geiselman priced his paperbacks at 5 cents each, so commentator Ann Cecil priced hers at two for 5 cents. Geis retaliated by dropping his price: paperbacks free.

Since Geis also brought a variety of non-book (but sf and f related) items: Ann immediately bought the game, before Randy Hoffman had a chance. Sasha wasn't there, so Ann didn't have to buy the car CD player (that'll teach her to skip meetings).

Marvin Kilmer brought in a portion of his collection, Dan Bloch brought two boxes, Judi Galardi (who is joining PARSEC in January) brought some copies of her book, *Return to Thrae*, Chris Ferrier brought in some books, Barton & Elizabeth brought a box full. Henry Tjernlund outdid everyone with seven boxes (only up through C) from his mother's collection [he claims he was only bringing in duplicates, which was substantiated by the number of duplicates in the selection].

The official meeting was called to order at about 3pm by Geis. Raffle was held, won by Kira Heston, who took the hairsticks. Greg Armstrong read the Treasurer's report: We came out ahead \$77 this month.

Geis reviewed the coming meeting schedule: December is the Christmas party, January is in East Liberty, February back at Allegheny Center, March back to East Liberty. Geis also announced that he will be making the July 4th party at his house a regular event.

Ann Cecil announced that the by-laws vote passed, with over a third of total membership voting. No votes against were received.

No additional candidates being nominated, the new slate of officers was declared elected for 2005. Geis, Smith, Fisher, Armstrong, Cecil.

Geis also reviewed the topics for the meetings: January is to be the Art Show and Tell, February is open, March is Confluence topics, April, May, June and July are open, August is the picnic, September and October are open, November is the book sale, and December is the party. He is looking for suggestions for topics. Marvin Kilmer volunteered to check out South Park as a location for the August picnic.

There being no more official business, Geis sent everyone back to book buying. Henry announced a price drop (retroactive for previous customers).



“How now!” said Scrooge, caustic and cold as ever. “What do you want with me?”
“Much!—Marley’s voice; no doubt about it.

fully rounded characters and although it parodies the superhero genre, it does so without condescension.

It’s also a beautiful looking film, but I have to admit that I’ve come to expect that from the latest generation of computer animators. What really stands out in *The Incredibles* is the story.

In a world right out of comic books, superheros have all had to retire because of the threat of lawsuits. Save a doomed train get sued by injured passengers. Stop a suicide, get taken to court for interfering with the jumper’s civil rights. Comics meets the real world.. Remember the case of McDonald’s and the hot coffee?

Assigned new identities by the government, the former heros settle down to lives of anonymity. Mr. Incredible is now insurance adjuster Bob Parr (the voice of Craig T. Nelson) and his wife Elastigirl now renamed Helen Parr (the voice of Holly Hunter), stays home to raise their three children. The children also have super powers which complicate their attempts to be normal all american kids. Imagine trying to participate in sports if you can move faster than a speeding bullet. It’s no fun always winning. (Well, maybe for some, but most of us would miss the challenge.)

Tempted by a mysterious woman to sneak off to a mysterious island to continue fighting bad guys, Bob finds that he’s taken on more than he expected. His wife, convinced that he’s having an affair follows him and the action begins.

Lost

ABC - Wed. Night

reviewed by David Brody

Speaking of mysterious islands, don’t miss ABC’s new hit drama, *Lost*. Reruns should start soon, so if you can catch it from the beginning all the better. *Lost* follows the adventures of the survivors of a plane crash on an uncharted South Pacific Island. It’s already been described as “*Gilligan’s Island* meets *X-Files*” but that hardly does it justice.

So far, in addition to a series of strange island weirdnesses, every episode has included flashbacks that tell the story of each major character and the events that lead them to be on the fateful plane. It’s clear that everyone of them is desperately in need of a new start in life. Is this the afterlife? Purgatory? An alien experiment? Maybe all of them put together?

Whatever the truth turns out to be, it’s a huge amount of fun finding out. The characters are plausible and complex. The performances are all at least good, some terrific. The story as it has so far unfolded is riveting and continues to defy predictability.

Lost is the best new TV show in years.

Space Report: A Look Back at 2004

Henry Tjernlund

2004 has seen several important and historical developments in space technology. Here are some of them (in no particular order).

Space Ship One, a manned craft from a company called Scaled Composites, was the first commercial sub-orbital space flight. Three times this year the same craft made a tire rubber and nitrous oxide rocket propelled climb to the 100 km (62 miles) official edge of space and glided back down again for a safe landing. The last two flights having occurred within 2 weeks of each other won the coveted X-Prize worth \$10 million (although about \$40 million was estimated to have been spent on the endeavor.) It should be noted, however, that orbital flight is significantly more difficult to attain than the sub-orbital "hops" made by Space Ship One. But, a milestone has been reached and let's hope that a similar orbital commercial flight is only a few years away.

The Endeavor and Spirit rovers exceeded all hopes and explored the Martian surface well beyond their initial mission profiles. Both rovers found consistent evidence of past water in the rocks they examined. Orbital Mars missions continue to return images of surface features that also add to the belief that Mars was once a wet world.

Farther out in the solar system the Cassini mission to Saturn made orbital insertion around the ringed gas giant. Along the way Cassini returned the first close-up pictures of the outer most Saturn moon which is suspected to also be a captured Kuiper Belt object. If this is true, then those same pictures would be the first ever close up images of one of the icy bodies from the region beyond Neptune where short period comets are believed to originate. Cassini also made the first of many fly-bys of the thickly cloud covered moon Titan. (Cassini was launched from Earth in 1997 and took 7 years to reach Saturn.)

The Messenger probe to Mercury made its launch this year but is not scheduled to begin orbiting the inner-most solar system planet until 2008. The European Rosetta mission to several comets was also launched this year. Brazil, with the help of the European Space Agency (ESA) made its first successful launch of an unmanned rocket containing several satellites. Europe's Smart-1 ion propelled probe reached the Moon after a slow, but fuel-efficient demonstration of solar powered electric propulsion.

Twice this year NASA broke speed records with its second and third test of a scram-jet engine, the latter of which reaching Mach 10, almost 7,000 mph in an unmanned test vehicle.

All in all it's been a remarkably successful year for space missions, and first time or follow-up accomplishments. Let us hope that future years will meet and exceed this one.

2004 Holiday Party

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

Those bringing small children should also bring some entertainment (toys, games, etc....)

People traditionally bring something but there will be some cookies and some real food made by the house, and this year Greg promises to make more bread. Punch, of course, is traditional (and non-alcoholic); beer is in the basement (microbrews, mostly Penn and some Weyerbacher), also wine. Very little hard liquor. Mixed drinks are BYO.

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

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

From the trolley: Catch the 42S. Get off at Kelton, walk north (towards Pgh. on the sidewalk), cross Hillsdale and tracks, half a block west to Voelkel, and enter first house (not apartment bldg) on left side of ave.).

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

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

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