

June 2004 Meeting

Date: June 12th 2004, 2 PM (Although members tend to arrive early.)
Topic: Kevin Geiselman on Godzilla
Location: East Liberty Branch of Carnegie Library

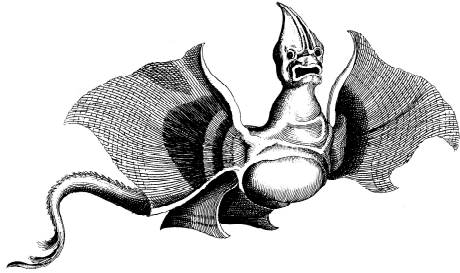
PARSEC Tentative Meeting Schedule

July 2004

Date: July 10th 2004
Topic: Sasha's Art Show & Tell
Location: East Liberty Branch of Carnegie Library

August 2004

Date: August 14th 2004
Topic: Annual Parsec Picnic
Location: Bellevue Park



PARSEC

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 • June 2004 • Issue 219

In This Issue:

Hayes On The Edge

Kosak On Girls
With Halos

Hall On Halls





The View From the Top

The President's Column - Kevin Geiselman

This month's message from the president was going to be about spiritual journeys and the quest for enlightenment. I would have just returned from my marathon bike ride along the Youghogheny River Trail, Allegheny Highlands Trail and C&O Canal Towpath from McKeesport to Washington, DC and I would have talked about the reasons that people go on such pilgrimages. All last week I was composing an essay in

my head about what people hope to find and how the journey's end is not the destination itself but is only the first step on the next journey.

As I rode, I composed this column in my head, writing and re-writing it for transposition at journey's end. But as the journey continued, circumstances changed. I had to ride miles out of my way to bypass a mudslide. Busted up my bike. Bruised myself in the fall. Got rained on. Got rained on some more. Slept in a wet sleeping bag. Was harassed by clouds of mosquitoes and biting flies. Was deafened by cicadas and, in the end, never actually made it to the end of the trail.

By the end, the composition in my mind had devolved to nothingness. Not the perfect emptiness of zen enlightenment but a jagged-hole devoid of anything worthwhile. I rode over 300 miles, through rain and swarms of insects. I repaired my bike, survived physical injury, navigated bypasses in the dark and, all in all, did something most people will never do in their lifetimes. Yet, the last 30 miles that I didn't do weighs very heavily upon my psyche.

Sometimes enlightenment is not what you expect it to be. Disappointment can also be part of ones spiritual awakening.

Announcements

Seton Hill University's Graduate Program in Writing Popular Fiction

presents Editor & Agent Panel

June 26 panel free and open to the public

Seton Hill University's graduate program in Writing Popular Fiction will present "What's Changing in Genre Fiction: A Panel with Publishing Professionals" Saturday, June 26 from 7 - 8 p.m. in Cecilian Hall on Seton Hill's campus. The panel will feature Betsy Mitchell, Editor-in-Chief of Del Rey, Literary Agent Jennifer De Chiara and Susan Pezzack, Associate Editor of MIRA Books. Both the panel presentation and the reception to follow in the second floor parlors of Seton Hill's Administration Building are free and open to the public.

For more information on the panel or the Writing Popular Fiction Graduate program at Seton Hill University please contact Wendy Lynn at (724) 830-4600 or lynn@setonhill.edu.



Notes From the Maintenance Department

The Editor's Column - David Brody

So *Sigma* is late and the Confluence flyer I'm suppose to do is late and Ann is going to get testy. (That'll be the day.) Blame it all on the imps that rule my wretched life. Dark creatures they are; fell beasts that crawled in the primal ooze long centuries before the old ones strode the earth. Now they shamble from their ancient crypts, reaching for the Sun that once again they yearn to dwell beneath.

That's the four month old imp and the toddler imp.

As an at-home dad, every move I make is with their permission (either jointly or individually). Every word I type is at their pleasure. Every minute of sleep is a gift.

!CHILDREN FOR SALE - CHEAP!

The contradiction here is that, if you tried to take the above offer seriously, I'd have to cut off your fingertips with a large knife like that scene in *True Grit*.

As you may have noticed, this month's *Sigma* is a lot about angst.

Speaking of angst, I was pleased with the e-mail response to last issue's Letter to the Editor and my column which prompted it. I was heartened to discover that there was support for both my political views and my right to express them on this page. I had intended to print a couple of these e-mails in their entirety, but found myself in the enviable position, once again this month, of having more material than space. Here, however, is a sampling of the opinions expressed.

Eric Davin wrote that, "Randy bragged that we shut down Saddam's "political prisons" and freed his prisoners. Seems we're still running Abu Gharib, Saddam's most notorious political prison, only now it's our own!"

Carole McIntyre said: "Mr. Bush entered office with surpluses which he promptly dissipated; we are looking at crushing deficits. The administration in general had been much less than transparent about practically any issue one could name. After the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, we had the sympathy and support of much of the world. Now, the State Department is warning Americans abroad not to "look too American."

I hope that in excerpting these two letter I've managed to convey an accurate sense of each author's intended message. If not, I apologize.

On a note more appropriately "from the maintenance department": Thanks to the increase in submissions to *Sigma* I've been forced to take the monthly deadline of the 25th a little more seriously than I used to, but I admit to having become lax about acknowledging the receipt of articles and just generally staying in contact with contributors. I hope to do better. For my excuse, refer to paragraphs one through three.

Is that Cthulhu's offspring or mine asleep (at long last) in the swing next to my desk?

The Day After Tomorrow

Directed

by

Roland Emmerich

reviewed by William Blake Hall

We Halls are at it again. In 1971 James Olson played surgeon Mark Hall in *The Andromeda Strain*, based on Michael Crichton's first best-seller, and as Project Wildfire's "key man" he stopped a nuclear explosion and saved Earth from an extraterrestrial superplague. Now, in *The Day After Tomorrow*, Dennis Quaid plays paleo-climatologist Jack Hall (one wonders if anyone is aware of how important the name "Jack Hall" is to the political history of Hawaii), but this time he can't really avert anything, but is stuck in the role of Cassandra and must nobly track down his son in a grim and wintry variation on *Finding Nemo*.

Given that the director is Roland Emmerich, who gave us *Independence Day* and *Godzilla*, I was very pleasantly surprised by how non-cheesy this movie managed to be. If there's any one bad habit that Emmerich is still infatuated with, it's insisting on shots of meaningless and/or irrelevant icons. The Earth's climate shifts violently, but can he spend a few seconds in Miami or New Orleans? No, things can only happen to Manhattan and L.A., and only to supremely dubious "landmarks" like the Hollywood sign and the Capitol Records tower. He adores the Statue of Liberty, to the point where you have to wonder: isn't there any way to get to Manhattan BESIDES walking or flying past Lady Liberty?

That one nit aside, though, he has developed remarkable restraint and control for a Disaster King — and let's face it, the disaster genre is inherently handicapped from being able to reach full excellence. Personally, I consider this a disaster movie with "legs," one which you'll actually want to look at over and over as the years progress. Track down the British movie *The Day the Earth Caught Fire*, about nuclear bomb tests throwing us off our orbit and towards the Sun, and have a Fire and Ice double feature.

You'll hear that this is "controversial." Baloney. Everyone can agree that this is a scientifically SILLY movie, and though it may be more topical than most, it is first and last a thriller, and as that it succeeds. I hesitate to call it "pseudoscience," but it is most definitely fringe science. The idea is that polar meltwater is desalinating the oceans, and that this is affecting the North Atlantic current which regularly supplies us with our warm weather; thus, global warming can actually leave us a colder Northern Hemisphere.

This movie is based in part on a wild book, I think called *The Coming Global Superstorm*, but personally it reminded me of the novel *Blizzard* by George Stone. Hall's "paleo-climatology" comes in handy by providing proof that a short rapid Ice Age occurred just 10,000 years ago, and this is how he winds up possessing the only computer model able to predict what will happen. A storm system grows into what looks like a continent-sized hurricane, and the "eye" funnels down ultracold air from the upper atmosphere so rapidly that

Bill Hall won the raffle and took a book (Paul McAuley's "The Secret of Life").

Kavan Ratnatunga then gave a presentation on Sir Arthur C. Clarke, whom he has known since boyhood, and who inspired him to become an astronomer. Kavan began with an overview of Clarke's writing career, illustrating that career by showing us copies of many of the publications in which his work appeared. Kavan has an extensive collection of Clarke's works (he only brought the famous ones, since there wasn't enough space for everything), with some interesting notes by Clarke along with signatures.

For instance, a 1945 article that recommended three satellites in "geosynchronous orbit" for *Wireless World* is signed by Clarke with the note that "I still think this is a good idea."

Clarke's first novel was *Prelude to Space* in 1951. His earliest "name on the cover" was an old issue of *Fantasy*, with the story "Sentinel of Eternity." This is an earlier version of the story that inspired the movie *2001*. Kavan noted that most of Clarke's short stories appeared in various places with minor changes before going into fixed form in the "Collected Stories."

Kavan then went on to talk about Clarke and Sri Lanka (Kavan's native land). Clarke made his first trip there 50 years ago to do diving. Clarke moved there permanently in 1956, and lives in Columbo, the capital. He has often written descriptions of one of his favorite vacation spots, a beautiful piece of coast where there is a temple that Kavan's family has protected by buying land around it. Because of Clarke's descriptions, the place is now being overrun with tourists.

Kavan talked about the making of *2001*, and Clarke's joke about losing the special effects Oscar to *Planet of the Apes*: "people thought the apes in *2001* were real." Through the 70's, Clarke was living 6 months in Sri Lanka and 6 months elsewhere, to evade taxes. Sri Lanka then established a "Distinguished Citizen" status especially for Clarke, so he could stay there all year round.

In 1962, while trying to make a film at a lighthouse at the end of Sri Lanka, divers found a sunken ship with a boatload of treasure. Clarke was involved, and Kavan had a sample of the coins from this Taj Mahal treasure, which he showed us. Clarke wrote *The Treasure of the Great Reef* about this adventure.

Currently Clarke has health problems which cause him to sleep 14 hours a day, and keep him from traveling. Kavan is taking him the plaque for Hal, voted in as a member of the Robot Hall of Fame. Kavan then related a number of personal anecdotes about Clarke and his family, talked about Sri Lanka, and answered questions from the audience.

The meeting adjourned around 5pm and no one got tickets at the parking lot, whether they put in quarters or not (Geis really DID ignore the meter).

As there was a con-com meeting afterward, there was no official after-meeting, though most of the usual suspects turned up at the Edge later (post con-com meeting) and we had about 8 members at a table in the back room.

Reported by Ann Cecil

Tjernlund - continued from page 6

extensive testing before parting with the tried and true airbag system.

Foreign missions are more difficult to research but here is what I have found so far. Europe is presently in the planning stages of an ExoMars orbiter and lander (with a special biology instrument payload) combination set for 2009. There is talk about the British Space Agency trying another Beagle lander (named after the sea ship where Charles Darwin made some of his discoveries about evolution). The first Beagle lander failed to make contact after its Christmas 2003 landing attempt.

Although a manned landing on Mars is certain to eventually occur, the cost with present day technology makes robotic missions more economical. Additionally, some scientists want to make sure that there is no indigenous Mars life that would be biologically contaminated by manned activities on the surface. Although there is some risk of contamination with robotic missions, it is believed that human presence would not be able to avoid the release of a wide range of Earth microbes into the Mars environment.

But until then, with US and foreign missions, Mars should see the arrival of an orbiter or lander every launch window. These occur about every 18 months. Such missions only take six to nine months of transit time, unlike deep space missions to Jupiter or Saturn that take years.



Hayes - continued from page 7

movement on the 501(c)3 goal. All things of interest; all things of import to no one but ourselves.

Some of us expanded our beer horizons. Shang Shan and Dan Rad availed themselves of beer samplers while I tried an E.S.B. something. It was what Ann ordered, so I figured I'd try it. Once it arrived, I gained a better understanding of the meaning of "extra special bitters." Ann found the nitrogenated brew to be undrinkable while I, with my barbaric palate, managed to choke it down. The samplers were sampled and reinforced (to me) the reasons not to drink Belgians.

I'm sure there was more conversation and discussion, but that's the way a fellowship like this works. After all is said and done, all you remember is the good time.

Maybe next time we'll manage the cynical and witty stuff.

Reviews



Hainbane-Renmei (released by Pioneer)

Anime

reviewed by Wendy S. Kosak

This is a fantasy story, I think. I've only seen the first DVD so far, but I'm very much in love with this series already. From the beautiful art, to

the amazing original story to the quiet classical piano music soundtrack, this is a true gem.

Hainbane-Renmei is Japanese for Gray Feathers and is the name given to young girls with wings and halos in a mythical land. The story starts with Rakka who bursts out of a cocoon, approximately 14 years old at "birth", wiped clean of all memory of who she is but otherwise normal. Well, until her wings sprout later that night. She finds herself in the care of other teenage girls and a bevy of younger children, all like her, with gray wings. All have awoken in this new world with only verbal legend to guide them. Halos are made in a little pancake mold and fixed in place until they float over the girl's head freely. Across town is another commune of Hainbane, some of them teenage boys.

The Hainbane live in a crumbling old building that might have been a private school that they now call "Old Home." A short distance away, across fields with windmills, is a small town that looks very old-world European. And around everything is a high wall. No one knows what's on the other side of the wall, or how the world came into being. No one is allowed to cross over the wall except mysterious mute traders with crow-like masks. The Hainbane are forbidden to own property or have money, and they must work in town. They carry tablets from which they hand out pages to townspeople in exchange for the hand-me-down items they need to survive.

In the opening credits we see that a dandelion-like seed fell out of the sky, landed in one of the schoolrooms, and grew into the cocoon that Rakka burst out of. In one episode, one of the girls "knows" its time and goes into the wood and ascends in a shaft of bright light, leaving behind clothes and her halo.

What the heck is going on? I'm not sure, but I'm having fun having my brain twisted by this. I didn't think I would like this series after hearing a synopsis of it, and certainly I don't think I'm doing it justice either. It's very quiet but extremely original. The story so far is Rakka's exploration of the world she has found herself in and trying to find her place in it. I think that this is a land between earth and heaven, where the girls need to work through issues prior to going to heaven. If you're a giant robot fan, this isn't the story for you, but if you like neat world building and realistic interpersonal relationship, this is a must see!



Space Report

Henry Tjernlund

Future Mars Missions

The twin Martian rovers (Spirit and Opportunity) have finished their initial 90 day missions. They are now into an extended phase where they will continue to move from one target location to another while taking measurements. This extended phase will run at least through the summer and perhaps into the fall depending, or course, on the operational condition of the rovers.

I will not say much about what they have found so far as that data is still being analyzed. There will be many science magazine articles and books on the subject. (One noteworthy item is that they have found even more evidence of liquid water once having been on the Mars surface at various locations.) Instead, this article will be about the future, mission wise, for the Red Planet.

Next in line from the U.S. is the Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter scheduled for launch in August 2005. The MRO will feature the most powerful telescopic camera sent to orbit another planet. It should be able to image surface features down to a couple of meters. Additionally an improved ground penetrating radar will provide more information about sub-surface features than previous Mars orbiters could provide. This is part of continuing efforts to look for ice and sub-surface water. The current catch phrase for NASA's search for life is "follow the water."

The newly proposed Phoenix lander would be the first in a series of planned light weight surface scout missions. The first of these, scheduled for a 2007 launch, might be landed in the polar regions to analyze the Martian ice cap material and environment. This particular mission would not be a rover but would likely carry a drilling device for examining sub-surface composition. Other future scout missions might use flying or balloon explorers for aerial exploration of the surface.

The Mars Science Laboratory, unlike the light scout missions, is a super-sized rover being planed for a 2009 launch. This first nuclear powered "smart" rover is designed to have long range and endurance. Instead of opening for only months, this rover is hoped to continue for a full Martian year (almost 2 Earth years.) This rover, still in the planning stage, may also be the basis for future sample return missions in the next decade. The MSL is the last US mission with firm planning made so far. It is yet uncertain if the MSL will be fitted with instruments able to make a definitive examination for present or fossilized microbial life. One aspect of the mission that is under scrutiny is the landing method. Initial reports have the engineers wanting to depart from the airbag system and try something new. One idea is to use a "sky crane" deployment where a rocket platform would hover above the Martian surface and then lower, or perhaps drop, the rover the last couple meters to the ground. One would hope that NASA would conduct

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Life at the Edge

Kevin Hayes

Literary discussion, witty repartee, and cogent thought have long been a tradition of the intelligentsia of any given culture. Groups of like-minded people meet, find common ground and continue to meet for stimulation and company. Probably the most recently famous group like this was the legendary Algonquin Round Table, a collection of New York literati who allegedly met for lunch on a regular basis and would entertain, insult and otherwise challenge each other as colleagues and compatriots. Among these past giants were the likes of Dorothy Parker, Alexander Woolcott, Robert Benchley and several others. These were the New York elite. These were the ones who made their lives and livelihood with wit and words.

Lately, a number of us seem to be building a tradition of going to the Sharp Edge after PARSEC meetings to have a bite to eat and perhaps a soothing libation. We may not make as much with our wit and words, but we do find ways to be entertained. It seems appropriate.

I would love to think that our musings, debates, discussions, book reviews, critiques and debriefings could some day take on the legendary status of some of the epigrams attributed to the famed Algonquin habitués, but I don't think any of us are dedicated epigramists. We discussed this at a recent Sharp Edge get together. For those who may not know, the Sharp Edge is a local, legendary (in my mind) beer emporium. I'm firmly of the belief that if it can't be gotten at the Sharp Edge, it may not be worth drinking. Most of us recalled some of the acerbic comments attributed to Dorothy Parker. For instance, in describing a performance by a very young Katherine Hepburn, she said, "She ran the emotional gamut from A to B." We remarked about her poetry and the general sense that she wasn't very happy about anything, but was afraid she'd be disappointed with the result if she actually tried to end it all.

None of us are anywhere near as cynical or witty. For cynical, I would offer JJ Walton, and for witty, Timons Essias. Unfortunately, neither was in attendance, so we just had to make do. It was Ann Cecil, Dan Bloch, Chris Ferrier, Shang Shan Chong, Dan Radakovich and me, your humble reporter (it's a saying—like "esteemed opponent"— no one really means it).

We made no attempt to match the wit and banter of the original Algonquin crew, be we had a time. We discussed important stuff like what books were being read. I mentioned I was doing battle with Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Years of Rice and Salt*. I questioned whether it was truly an alternate timeline novel to which Ann and Dan Bloch offered eloquent arguments in support of its inclusion in that sub-genre. Ann finished it, but Dan didn't quite, all of which motivates me to continue the struggle.

Upcoming movies were brought up, as well as a quick discussion of the

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May Minutes



PARSEC Meeting May 8, 2004

Called to order by President Kevin Geiselman at about 2 pm. Greg Armstrong presented the Treasurer's Report (we made \$1.53 in April). Ann Cecil reported on program to organize the paperwork for filing for IRC 501(C)(3) status (true non-profit). The group estimates that one more meeting (scheduled for May 24 at 7:30 pm at Ann's house) will be enough to put together the new forms including revised by-laws. They will then need to be run by various knowledgeable and helpful people who have done this before, and then the sub-committee hopes to have a mailing to all paid members sometime in June.

David Brody spoke briefly on the organization for PARSEC's booth at the Three Rivers Arts Festival, which will be in existence on the grass portion somewhere near the Food Court side of the road, and will have a tent. The booth will be open on the last weekend of the Festival (June 18-20) when only maybe 150,000 people attend. Plans are to use the art panels to extend and display artwork, with tent walls each dedicated to an activity: One for Confluence, one for Alpha, one for regular programs (monthly meetings). We will have a table to show off PARSEC publishing products, and any other member items. We can sell stuff, but it should not be the main focus of the booth. The stuff should be unique and snaf (or fantastic) [e.g., handmade soap dragons are good, daisies are probably going to raise questions]. Final plans and assignments will be done at the June meeting.

TRFN has handed out its dying notice. Our President and Webmaster, Geis, announced that we are moving the website to mongo-hosting.com, and will have a new address: www.parsec-sff.org. This will only cost us \$20 per year, and has lots and lots of benefits.

Next month's meeting is Sasha's Art Show and Tell, in which Sasha does the organizing and presenting and all of your Show and Tell art projects. [editorial note: due to circumstances involving a conflict in timing, Sasha's Art Show and Tell will be the July meeting, and June will be Godzilla].

Ann Cecil pointed out that July 2004 will mark the 20th anniversary of PARSEC (the first meeting, in Barb's back yard, was in July of 1984). Ann, as elected Commentator, plans to write a special article for the July SIGMA.

This year's ALPHA starts on July 14th, with a new crop of another 20 eager students. And the picnic, in Bellevue Park again, will be August 14th.

Geis started review of 'movies to go to' by mentioning that the original 1954 version of *Godzilla* (without the dubbed in Raymond Burr) is showing in the DC area and Philly over the next 3 weeks. Geis is determined to see it.

there's no time for any warming to kick in.

From here the movie becomes a chance to explore surreal vignettes. Personally, when I see a Nietzschean atheist holed up in the New York Public Library hugging the Gutenberg Bible to keep it from being burned for heat, I'm charmed and I have to say to myself "This is not your usual disaster movie." I hope you will agree.

Art Deadlines List

reviewed by Barbara Carlson

We were asked to review *Art Deadlines List*, and I found it to be worthwhile, if somewhat lacking in organization. I think it could be useful to some people in Parsec, especially those who are interested in, involved in producing, or who teach in any of the creative arts fields.

It is billed as a list, and a list it is. Each listing starts with a date and a title. This is followed by pertinent information. Paid ads (\$90 for one month, \$170 for two, \$240 for three and \$60 for each additional month) get listed first, have the date in bold and are printed in a slightly larger font. This reviewer isn't sure this benefit is worth the money, unless the readership is generally afflicted with ADD and can't manage to sift through the (rather dense) amount of information provided.

Art Deadlines List is an impressive collection of everything from events to contests, calls for entries, exhibitions and even jobs. Some listings are very specific (e.g. "Call for submissions from Irish artists" or "Seeking writing about farming"), others are more general (e.g. "Seeking nonfiction manuscripts" or "Summer Arts Festival"). Definitely makes interesting browsing.

The list is published once a month and can be obtained via the U.S. Mail or email. It claims it reaches 20,000-30,000 WWW visitors and 1,500 paper edition readers per month. Cost of subscription is \$36 a year (\$70 for organizations) with a \$2 (\$20 for organizations) price break for subscribing for two years. They can accept payment via PayPal, U.S. bank check, USPS money order or International postal Money Order. The URL is <http://artdeadlineslist.com>, email is adl@rtuh.com, phone is 617-576-1214, fax is 617-926-9519 and U.S. Mail address is: Art Deadlines List; Box 381067; Harvard Sq. Stn.; Cambridge, MA 02238-1067.

The only problem with this publication is the lack of organization. It doesn't appear to be listed in chronological order, nor is it alphabetical. It's not clear just what the dates mean – some are near future, other are more distant, some coincide with deadlines, some don't. The only thing that is clear is that this February issue had no dates older than February. It also isn't clear how long your notice would be listed if you don't pay for it.

All things considered, *Art Deadlines List* is a useful resource for artists, writers, photographers, videographers, art educators and art students. This reviewer would like to see Parsec get a subscription to be read by our writers groups and artists.