

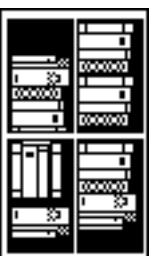
Last Meeting (cont)

to demonstrate without destroying.

The lessons of Semester at Sea are very important to global understanding, and have a much more immediate application than in any other sort of classroom. In visiting 10 ports, students meet 10 cultures, 10 languages, and 10 or more important events and/or places that are a big part of the curriculum.

Many students found that the semester at sea violated their comfort zone. The whole point is that each of the encounters, each port of call, is an alien place, just as alien as if the students were to visit Romulus or Vulcan, in fact probably even more alien.

The students' choice for most interesting story they were asked to write about was "Guest of Honor", by Robert Reed. A woman is being welcomed back to her family as a guest of honor after a long time away. It then develops that this woman is a clone put together from various biological parts of her family, and has experienced a generation starship style voyage about the universe. The plot is that she will be terminated, her memory downloaded into the family members that donated to her.



Bookshelf

The Jehovah Contract

Victor Koman

PULPLESS.com, East Bithedale Ave., Suite 508, Mill Valley, CA 94941,
1984, 1987, 1999, ISBN 1-58445-024-X, US \$19.95

Del Ammo is a highly skilled and highly paid assassin who specializes in removing dictators, politicians and other undesirables. As a cover he keeps an office in a seedy section of post apocalyptic Los Angeles and hires himself out as a private detective, peering through windows and sorting through garbage.

Ammo's section of Los Angeles is seedy due to the detonation of a small nuclear device which destroyed a single building. (Gang warfare is very sophisticated.) The resulting radiation permeated the building where Ammo's office is located so rents are very low.

Ammo is dying from a particularly nasty form of bone cancer brought on by the aforementioned radiation, but he is so world weary the news that he has but a short time to live is something of a relief.

When a very dapper man steps into Ammo's office to offer him an assignment, Ammo at first tells the client to go elsewhere. The man is very persuasive so Ammo decides to let him finish and is intrigued. The man, a well known television evangelist, wants Ammo to hunt down and kill God. As a retainer, the man miraculously removes all traces of the cancer from Ammo's body.

Whether he believes or not, someone takes Ammo's case very seriously and sets out to kill Ammo before he can complete the assignment. Of course now Ammo is determined to do his best, and the fun begins.

Ammo isn't forced to go it alone. Along the way he meets a 16 year old virginprostitute who is also a broadcasting telepath, an ancient Gypsy crone with strange powers and an appetite for handsome men, and a very beautiful woman who can walk through security nets without being noticed.

Aided by this trinity of unlikely females, Ammo hunts for his quarry by questioning representatives of various religions, reading the works of many philosophers and theologians, and asking people about their perception of God.

The Jehovah Contract is primarily Koman's manifesto outlining his dissatisfaction with religion in general and the Catholic Church in particular.

BookShelf (cont)

To his credit, Koman does not beleaguer the point. Most of his arguments are delivered via Ammo's research into the nature and location of God.

The final showdown with God is very anticlimactic. Ammo perceives God as a crazy, bitter, but very powerful, old man filled with resentment for his children.

Does Ammo really kill God? It doesn't matter. Ammo is operating on the theory that since God is such an intangible, no matter which religion, if he can make everyone believe God is dead he will have succeeded.

Or is Ammo delusional? He's had the nasty shock of being told he'll soon die in a very unpleasant manner. Is he still relatively sane? Or has his mind come up with a means for him to perpetrate the ultimate revenge?

It is interesting to note that Koman attempted to tap into the Y2K hysteria 16 years early.

Koman showed a bit of optimism in his depiction of the world in the year 2000: space exploration is so far along that it is possible to buy a used space shuttle and the facilities to launch it on the open market.

PULPLESS.com, the publisher of The Jehovah Contract prides itself in using recycled materials in construction of its books. This is a highly laudable endeavor, but I feel I must express my dissatisfaction with their publishing processes.

At least one quarter of the pages in this particular copy were so badly printed the text literally brushed off. This left blank areas making some parts of the book difficult to read.

Of course I don't know if all copies of this book are so afflicted: if they are, I hope PULPLESS.com addresses the issue quickly and resolves the problem in future editions.

Book review by James J. Walton

The Silk Code
by Paul Levinson.

I only read "The Silk Code" by Paul Levinson once. Other people I've talked to mentioned how they try to read something they plan to review twice. Once to get the over-all impression of the piece and a second time to note and appreciate (or not) the subtlety of detail and structure.

Well, I'm flying this buggy by the seat of my pants. Hopefully, I can give my impressions after just one read and without a copy of the book at

Last Meeting (cont)

Presentation was by Philip Smith, who is a professor in the English Department, University of Pittsburgh, and has taught Science Fiction literature classes since 1975. He also contributed reviews to the Pittsburgh Press, and is a current contributor to the NY Review of SF.

The Semester at Sea program started in the early 1960's. Pitt will give credit for 3 semesters a year for Semester at Sea. Fall and Spring voyages literally go around the world. Fall typically leaves from the west coast, goes west around the world. Spring is typically east coast, go east around world. Faculty is about 30, representing most disciplines except lab sciences. Physics, marine biology, social sciences, humanities. 30-50 Adult passengers, 630 students.

Tuition is about \$14,000. Pitt student can go for \$7,000 as work-study. In comparison, a semester at Pitt is around \$5-6,000 tuition + room and board. Faculty comes from many places, only about 3-4 from Pitt. Staff positions available: Computer room supervisor, Residents assistants, Bursar.

Semester at Sea is not a cruise. It is a voyage, a working voyage. When a man is lost overboard, there is virtually no chance for them to be rescued.

The Universe Explorer, the Semester at Sea ship, is under direct command of the captain.

Sea-sickness, and gaining your "sea legs" can both be a distraction from the classes, though the students, having paid for the semester, for the most part study and work hard. The ship visits 10 ports, spending 50 days at sea, and 50 days in port, circumnavigating the globe. There are no holidays at sea. Every day while at sea are class days. Many parallels can be drawn between the Universe Explorer and a starship.

The first book taught in the Science Fiction course was The War of the Worlds. The course started by comparing the work with colonialism at or near the end of the 19th century.

The Dharmok episode of ST:TNG was shown to the class. The Dharmok speak only in metaphors, and obviously by the end of the episode, Picard has, with the help of his crew, managed to overcome this limitation. This was shown in order to prepare the students for visits to the foreign ports.

In Japan, in Kobe, Smith led a group to Hiroshima, in order to show how the knowledge of atomic power and weapons is still important today. In class, the students read Kim Stanley Robinson's alternate history story in which the bomb was dropped outside Hiroshima instead of on it, in order

Last Meeting

Meeting Minutes for September 9, 2000 by Tom Morrow

Next meeting will be at Squirrel Hill branch of library, and will feature book sale and discussion on revisions of PARSEC bylaws. Ann Cecil talked about a proposal for changing the commentator to a real job, with duties (like a column in SIGMA).

Kate Elliot will be the November speaker, at Squirrel Hill. December is the Christmas party.

Announcements:

Election for new officers is also coming up.
Short Story Contest closing the week of the 17th

Guests: Bob Mullins, Marshall Stahl announced; Marshall had left, but Bob was introduced.

Jean Martin talked about her meeting with David Brin at WorldCon, and his Webs of Wonder contest.

Ann Cecil introduced a discussion of the PARSEC Short Story contest prizes: there are anonymous donors for the 1st and 3rd prizes, but none for the 2nd prize. Diane Turnshak made a motion that PARSEC provide the 2nd prize (\$100), Kira Heston seconded, and it was unanimously passed.

PARSEC Picnic — Kevin Hayes volunteered to get info on Bellvue Park. (\$75 w/o, \$85 w/ elec, can set up to rent pool too)
Picnic will be set for 2nd Sat. in July until further notice.

Treasurer's report was presented by Mia Sherman:
Technical Difficulties, so no printout.
\$1098.41 in current account.

Ann Cecil reported on the state of the Otherworlds Fair (OWF): PARSEC is currently in negotiations with CMU to get rooms for OWF. Probably will end up in early spring. Feb, Mar, Apr.

The raffle was won by Diane Turnshak, who gave the winning ticket to the visitor, Bob Mullins, who picked out a piece of artwork.

BookShelf (cont)

hand for ready reference.

On the whole, I enjoyed reading "The Silk Code." At Confluence in February, I heard Paul Levinson read excerpts from his novel and later had the opportunity to discuss elements of it with him. This was enough to intrigue me to read it. The story is broken down into three main movements. First movement is actually a short story Levinson had published in "Asimov's" (I believe) which he re-worked to dovetail into the rest of his novel. He uses to section to introduce Phil D'Amato—a New York based forensic scientist—hero of the modern segments. He also introduces the concepts of centuries-old bio-engineering techniques and a vast (or perhaps not so vast) conspiracy dedicated to its own dark purposes—as all conspiracies are.

The next section takes us into the far distant past and introduces us to the idea of the "singers." Singers are described as heavy-browed, heavy-jawed, bulky and enormously strong. The intriguing idea is that Neanderthals somehow survived into, at least, relatively modern times and that their primary mode of communication is by singing. The singing they use is of a purity so profound that it elicits a complete understanding on an emotional level as well as an intellectual one.

This section follows the hero of the section, who starts as a fourteen year-old boy, on his odyssey around his ancient world to meet the Singers. His quest is to try to understand why some people of his acquaintance developed a disease which turned them into Singers just before killing them. In his travels, which he records in a journal, he learns from the Singers in a cinematic joining of cave pictures, the true history of the world and answers to other questions, as well.

In the last section, we re-meet Phil D'Amato and follow his investigation into the death of a man who looks like a Neanderthal. This recently deceased person also has the unfortunately situation of having a body that carbon-dates to seem 30,000 years old.

Silk—if I may be allowed the obvious analogy—is woven through all of the latter portion of the story, providing the tantalizing thread by which the mystery unravels. Part of the cure, part of the cause; it takes the whole bio-engineering element to new interesting extremes.

The remainder of the story is spent following Phil D'Amato as he tries feverishly to figure out why people are dying all around him and why their bodies all resemble Neanderthals when they do. He is alternately infected by some unknown party with unusual, deadly diseases, then cured by his Amish friends introduced in the first chapter/section.

BookShelf (cont)

All wonderful ideas, neatly cut to fit into an interesting puzzle. But not to give too glowing a report...I had some real problems with some elements of his story. I never felt his characters in the latter half of the book were as distinctly drawn as those in the first half. Levinson never really explained the carbon-dating red herring to my satisfaction. And the short story adaptation for the first section still reads very independently of the rest of the book.

I loved his excursion into the ancient past and the search for the Singers. I wish modern New York and London were as interesting as ancient Afghanistan and the Iberian peninsula. And through it all, Phil watches his friends and acquaintances drop dead, or almost dead, from something he can't quite explain. No emotional turmoil, no grief and very little worry distracts him from his pursuit of the answer. I was puzzled by that. I'm sure a good cop will follow the case to the end, but I just couldn't see how this Italian Ubermensch could do it without a greater concern for his own survival and the survival of his friends and family.

Even though the mystery is comfortably resolved, there are still a number of loose ends. I half expect Dr. D'Amato to appear in some future novel, again beset by the vast shadowy conspiracy only he and the Amish have any knowledge of.

by Kevin Hayes

Ann 's Agenda (cont)

Well, I can't write this article for SIGMA without mentioning Solar Blade. A mock-up of Solar Blade is currently on display next to a Victoria mock-up and the actual RoboCrane in the FRC highway. The Solar Blade Heliogyro Nanosatellite is a CMU effort to fly the first solar sail, which is a space craft which does not need to carry any fuel: it uses thrust gained by reflecting sunlight off of its sail. The Solar Blade will weigh less than 5 kg, and have 4 blades in its sail, each 1 meter wide, 30 meters long, and 8 microns thick made of aluminized Kapton. Edge reinforcing Kevlar and battens of 80 micron-thick Kapton provide added stiffness and resistance to tears. The satellite is intended to demonstrate attitude precession, spin rate management, and orbital adjustments after which it will sail out past the orbit of the moon. It is hoped to launch Solar Blade in late 2001, as a secondary payload on a Delta II rocket, but not all of the only \$2 million in costs for the design, construction, and launch have been secured.

[added note by Ann]

PARSEC has been looking for a good non-profit project. Maybe we could start with the proceeds from the book sale, being held October 14th, as the next meeting, at the Squirrel Hill Library! We will also be discussing some upcoming changes proposed for the PARSEC by-laws.

See you there!



Ann 's Agenda (cont)

Sojourner was limited to the region within a few yards of the landing craft.

Of course, Bullwinkle can't practice for that task at the moment; his Mars Yard is currently being moved from the FRC highway to the Planetary Robotics building. This makes room for a new project, SunSync. SunSync, short for "Sun Synchronous Circumnavigation," is a short-duration project to build a robot to go to the Canadian High Arctic in late July 2001 for the sole purpose of driving around a hill once a day. The SunSync rover will be named Hyperion. Of course, if this project is successful, it opens the door for more ambitious projects later on. As Hyperion goes around the hill in Antarctica, it will be adjusting its speed to avoid the hill's shadow. Because the sun never sets during the Arctic summer, it means that Hyperion will have to be moving continuously. Did I mention that this will be a solar powered robot? If it goes into the shadow of the hill, it will, as much as robots can, "die." It will quite literally be in a race for its life. If it "wins" the race, it proves that solar synchronous circumnavigation is possible, which will help get funding for projects like Victoria, which will someday circumnavigate the Moon, where a "day" is equal to 29 days on the Earth and temperatures in the same location can range from 100 K to 350 K at different parts of the day. Keeping a robot from freezing or frying will have a lot to do with its location with respect to the sun. Another place this system could be used is Mercury, where a day lasts about as long as 58 days on Earth.

Bullwinkle's going to the Planetary Robotics Building means that it will be sharing space with SkyWorker, a robot being specifically designed for use in zero-gravity construction, such as an orbital solar power satellite. Unlike the International Space Station, one of these satellites will have immense lengths of structure that are "only" structure. They will support the solar energy collectors, but will not have to contain air or instruments. Basically, it will be a big, permanent scaffold in space. Physically, SkyWorker is really just three robotic arms stuck together. Two will be used as gripping legs that can hold onto the structure of the "scaffold," while the third arm actually carries a payload from one place to another. Because of the cost of getting building materials into orbit, the satellite will be made from parts that are as light-weight as possible. In other words, they will be flimsy. They will be able to hold the solar collectors together, but SkyWorker will have to be very gentle as it moves along the structure, hand over hand. It is programmed to give a gentle push to the payload to start it moving in the correct direction, then just move along under it, gripping it but guiding it as little as possible, until it reaches its destination. This way, very little stress is actually placed on the support structure of the satellites.

News Flash

The latest issue of the semi-prozine Terra Incognita contains the following locally related items:

The short story "Alien Fantasies" by former PARSECian and Worldwright Paul Melko.

The short story "Rewind" by PARSECian and Worldwright Supreme Master Mary Soon Lee.

The poem "Photonic Relationships" by PARSECian and Worldwright Timons Esaias.

Clearly our World Domination is inevitable.

Tim

Well, nothing like starting your writing career off with a bang: long distance PARSEC member Wendy Kosak has been offered a two book deal by ROC Books.

The first book is ALIEN TASTE and ROC wanted a second book based on the same characters.

In Wendy's own words: "ALIEN TASTE is a SF novel based in the near-future in Pittsburgh. I wrote it while still living in Pittsburgh (and before they tore down the old terminal and started to build all those stadiums!)"

Wendy's response when her agent asked whether a two book deal was okay: "SURE".

Wendy Kosak moves into the professional ranks!
Congratulations Wendy!

John Schmid

Tim Esaias has poems in the current issues of Asimov's (Oct/Nov 2000) and Fantasy Commentator (#52).

Mary Soon Lee sold the story "To the Maxi-Blender 3000, Serial Number 1-498-86" to On Spec.

Tim Esaias's poem "Objective Comparison" is in the Oct./Nov. issue of Asimov's.

NEXT MEETING

NEXT MEETING: Oct. 14, 2000
12:30 PM to 4:00 PM

PLEASE: We encourage people to bring a munchie or drink contribution ... pop, chips, cookies, etc.

LOCATION: Squirrel Hill Branch of Carnegie Library

TOPIC: Annual Book Sale, By-Laws

PARSEC Tentative Meeting Schedule

November 2000

Time & Date : 12:30, 11 November 2000
Speaker: Kate Elliott
Location : Squirrel Hill Branch of Carnegie Library

December 2000

Time & Date : 9 December 2000
Discussion Topic : Holiday Party
Location : Ann's House



P.A.R.S.E.C.

Pittsburgh Area Realtime Scientific Enthusiasts Club

PO Box 3681, Pittsburgh, PA 15230-3681

President - Ann Cecil Treasurer - Mia Sherman
Vice President - Sasha Riley Editor - Don Cox
Secretary - Tom Morrow Snide Commentator - Chris Ferrier

meetings - Second Saturday

next meeting - Saturday October 14, 2000

Dues: \$10 full, \$2 supporting

Ann's Agenda

Greg's Agenda (guest editorial)



Xavier hasn't had much time lately to tell knock-knock jokes. When he isn't trying to find his way out of the Learning Robot Lab using just his vision, he has been in the Field Robotics Center's highbay working for NASA as a construction foreman.

In the past, when Xavier wanted to leave the Learning Lab, he wandered around the room until his sonars spotted an opening large enough for him to pass through. Recently, he has been learning to find the doors (actually the door frame, which is present whether the door is open or closed) using just his video camera, without moving about. This is much faster—or it will be, once Xavier learns the difference between the closet door and the entry door.

Meanwhile, in the FRC highbay, Xavier has been using his twin B&W cameras to watch and command RoboCrane and Bullwinkle as they maneuver a horizontal beam into a vertical fitting. In the past, robotic teams have consisted of multiple identical robots; one robot alone could do a job, more could do it faster. Now, as NASA looks to the construction of large scale projects in space and on other planets, the need for teams of different robots, each with different abilities, has arisen. Thus the DIRA (Hebrew for "house") project was born. Within the Distributed Robot Architecture system, Xavier uses stereo vision to be the team's roving eyes, watching as RoboCrane lifts a beam, orients it, and guides it to a desired resting place; in this case, a "Y" shaped holder. As the beam gets closer to the holder, Xavier moves around to get the best possible view without obstructing RoboCrane. When the beam is nearly in place, Xavier calls on Bullwinkle, who uses his robotic arm to move the beam the last few inches into place gently and precisely.

This, by the way, is a break from Bullwinkle's other job, which is to be a test bed for stereo-vision controlled autonomous navigation programs which will soon be placed on a Mars Rover robot to be launched in 2003. It is hoped that these programs will allow that rover to explore well beyond a landing site on Mars. As you recall, the Mars

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The
Official
Newsletter
of
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