PARSEC, Pittsburgh's premier Science Fiction & Fantasy Organization SIGMA newsletter includes updates and announcements for all Parsec committees; Monthly Meetings, Confluence, Parsec Ink's Triangulation anthology and the new to the Writing Workshop committee, Write or Die (WorD) writing and critique group.

PARSEC INC., PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

I've started this column at least three times and haven't made it past 3 paragraphs. I used to be able to write one without even breaking a sweat. Not so much any more.

I would love to talk about Parsec in the past, I would love to talk about Parsec as it is and how it could be in the future. I am not a historian; I can only talk about what I've seen. I know there are people around who have been with Parsec since the beginning and can go into great detail about the first decade, back in the day when it was decided PARSEC was an acronym for Pittsburgh Area Realtime Scientifiction Enthusiasts' Club. Pretty friggin' awesome. I had been a lone fan of SF and F for a lot of years and was flabbergasted to find people who were fans and sort of out in the open about it. Sorry, there was no "sort of" about it. They were fans and would proselytize. If you weren't sure you were a fan, they set up the determination points, one by one, like dominos and knocked them down so there wasn't any question any more. And when that was done, they welcomed you into the fold and asked what you'd like to help with.

I look at the our current year - 2024 - and wonder, did any of the science fiction writers of history actually have a sense of where our world might be headed? George Orwell looked at world culture in 1934 and had a sense of what kind of a dystopian pathway it could take fifty years in the future when he wrote 1984. Okay, I don't know what year (or years) he wrote that, but it was published in 1949 - so, it wasn't a fifty year look into the future, it was maybe a thirty-five to forty year look. Ah, but I digress.

We find ourselves in the future year of 2024. Only it doesn't feel like the future, even though we carry wireless phones in our pockets that have more computing power than the big mainframes that did the calculations that took humans to the moon. I know we read about that stuff all the time. I think about it sometimes--that I do my typing (and writing) on a computer I never thought would exist. I recall reading about Jobs and Wozniac developing a portable computer that carried its own
memory with it and how it would only weigh about ten to twelve pounds. I couldn't believe a computer could ever actually be that light and do what computers are supposed to do.

I can remember my father awakening me in July of 1969 to set me down in front of a television and tell me I had to watch what was happening, Neil Armstrong was stepping from the Lunar Excursion Module onto the moon. I was jaded, I had been reading about man on the moon for a few years already—I was almost fourteen at the time—so all this space flight and solar system exploration was old hat to me. When I asked him why he had gotten me up, he explained that he never thought he would live to see the day when something as amazing as this would ever happen. My dad was born in 1921—think about it; that's over a hundred years ago now. Most aircraft were still bi-planes at the time.

So anyway, dealing with the future... Parsec, Science Fiction, Fantasy, Horror. We like to think we are interested in the media of the future -- and the past and the present. This is not just literature, it's also film, television, music and what else can we think of? I have asked people if they are fans of science fiction and they often advise me they aren't--because they don't like to read. So I ask what movies they like. They mention Hunger Games, Lord of the Rings, Jurassic Park, lots of the Marvel Cinematic Universe movies, and more, ad infinitum until I lose count. Fans who don't know they are fans.

Parsec, even with the COVID 19 pandemic, has moved towards the future. Parsec grows and changes and thankfully someone invented/developed ZOOM. For everyone who hates the app (things like this used to be called programs, anybody remember that?) how much of what gets accomplished today--both in business and in social organizations like Parsec, would never happen without it?

I continue to digress. Hard to concentrate, oxygen getting low...no, not really, just making excuses. Parsec accomplished a lot this past year. We had Confluence and set up for another in 2024. (See elsewhere in the newsletter) We are in the process of incorporating a writing group with a twenty-five year history into Parsec to provide a basis for workshop group and provide support for aspiring writers. The Parsec Ink Triangulation Anthology enjoyed its eighteenth iteration on its twentieth anniversary and looks to publish another. Both the anthology and the Parsec Short Story Contest enjoy a solid reputation for providing aspiring writers a platform for recognition and that platform is known in the SF/F/H culture for the high quality of its content. Part of our mission is to espouse the richness of speculative fiction in literature and other media and I would say we're doing okay in that aspect.

We can always use help to do this. Our Meeting committee recording secretary, Bill Hall is stepping back after providing an eye and ear into our monthly meetings for all Parsec members for seventeen years. He also gave rundowns on parties, picnics and Confluence itself for people who may have had to miss these events. He always seemed to provide a view that encouraged us to make it to the party, picnic or Confluence next time. We still anticipate seeing him at meetings and events once his life has settled down enough to allow him to participate again. Anybody interested in the position of recording secretary can contact me or anybody else on the Parsec Board of Directors or the Parsec Meeting Group committee. (or anybody else in Parsec, we'll figure it out.) We'd love to have your help.

(Parsec Board of Directors president, Kevin M. Hayes
The 28th Annual Parsec Short Story Contest is Open to Submissions

2024 Theme is “AI mythology”

Cash Prizes! No Entry Fee.
Youth Category Story Prize,
Submissions close on March 31, 2024
Read the full submission requirements on the website:

Visit the Website

MONTHLY MEETING

-Please note the venue change for January-

The Parsec Monthly Meeting will take place on Sat, Jan 20, 2024, IN PERSON, at the Mt Lebanon public Library - Meeting Room A.
Social time starts at 12:30pm with the official meeting starting at 1:00 pm.

A Zoom option is available for those that cannot make it in-person. The ZOOM will also open for social time at 12:30 pm.
Register for the Zoom meeting by visiting our website at https://parsec-sff.org/ or use the direct Zoom Registration link.
Our guest is Sarena Ulibarri, a writer and publisher of Solarpunk fiction. Solarpunk is a subgenre of science fiction that envisions a future where humanity has successfully integrated with nature and developed sustainable ways of living. It emphasizes renewable energy, particularly solar power, and features highly aesthetic, eco-friendly technology and architecture. Solarpunk narratives often focus on community, environmentalism, and ingenuity in solving ecological challenges, presenting an optimistic, solution-oriented view of the future that contrasts with the dystopian themes common in other science fiction genres.
**SAVE THE DATE**

The February 17th Parsec Meeting will be ZOOM only!

Our Guest will be Herb Kauderer, a frequent Confluence attendee. Our theme for Feb is science fiction and fantasy poetry.

Attendees of the Feb meeting are welcome to bring their own poems to read. It’s always fun to hear the variety of poetry that the SF/F/H community has written.

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**Chairperson's Column**

**Dino Chicken**

by Scot Noel

Growing up, one of my science heroes was John R. (Jack) Horner, a foremost field paleontologist. I still have “Digging Dinosaurs,” his 1988 work on my bookshelf, of which David Attenborough said, “this marvelous yet modest book sets up a new milestone in the advance of our understanding of these astounding creatures.”

“Digging Dinosaurs” explored the mystery of baby dinosaurs, and 35 years later, Jack Horner is still engaged in the exploration of the embryonic rather than the gigantic. To cut to the chase, he’s trying to make living baby dinos, sort of...

**The Start of the DinoChicken Project**

The DinoChicken or “Chickenosaurus” project began in 2011 and is funded mainly by public contributions. Its aim is to discover whether it is possible to alter birds in such a way that we might one day be able to create an animal similar to some of the extinct dinosaurs.

To date, key developments in the project include the ability to transform a chicken's beak into a dinosaur-like snout using a specific protein in chicken embryos. This protein is introduced through 'leaky beads' in a process pioneered in a lab at Yale. In this process, small beads are used as vehicles to deliver proteins to specific parts of the chicken embryo. These beads are designed to contain and gradually release the proteins they carry. As the beads slowly release the protein, it influences the development of the targeted region, leading to the transformation of the beak into a structure more reminiscent of a dinosaur's snout.

Additionally, a mutation known as the talpid chicken has been important in researching ancient embryonic structures. This mutation is not a natural breed or a specific species of chicken but rather a result of genetic mutations occurring within domestic chickens. The mutation provides insights into the processes of embryonic development, particularly how certain genes control the formation of skeletal structures and other physical traits.

One of the most striking features observed in talpids is the presence of teeth, a trait that is...
hallmark of dinosaurs but lost in modern avians. Talpids are a tangible link to the ancestral traits shared between birds and dinosaurs, offering insights into how these traits might be reactivated through genetic engineering.

**Learning to Reactivate One Dino Trait at a Time**

The project is also leveraging traits already present in modern birds, such as wing claws and elaborate head crests, which are reminiscent of dinosaur features. The primary focus currently is on replicating the long tail of dinosaurs. Horner's team has been studying bird tail biology to understand evolutionary changes and reverse them. They plan to utilize a protein discovered in mice, known to cause longer tails, to engineer a long dinosaur tail in chickens.

This endeavor involves a multi-step process, beginning with the introduction of the Lin28 protein at the end of chicken embryo tails. Following successful tail length extension, the team intends to use CRISPR technology to alter the chicken's DNA, allowing this long-tailed trait to be inherited by future generations of chickens.

**Human Health Implications**

I know what you’re thinking at this point. "Mad scientist introduces mutant dinosaur chickens to isolated island 120 miles west of Costa Rica. Theme Park planned." Instead, let’s talk about some unexpected discoveries related to medical research.

While the DinoChicken project is aimed at exploring the evolutionary transition from dinosaurs to modern birds, it has also led to significant findings in the fields of embryonic development and human health. Take that last bit about encouraging chicken embryos to grow tails.

It has led to the discovery that the transition from dinosaur to bird, such as the loss of the tail, was in part due to the shortening and fusion of vertebrae.

It turns out that inflammation plays a crucial role in the fusion of vertebrae during normal bone development in birds.

This finding challenges the traditional view of inflammation as merely a pathological response to injury or disease. To validate this discovery, the researchers compared the tail development of healthy birds with those treated with an anti-inflammatory drug, finding that the drug inhibited vertebrae fusion without any DNA manipulation.

These insights have significant implications for understanding human health, particularly in the context of inflammatory diseases like ankylosing spondylitis, a condition causing spinal vertebrae fusion, leading to reduced flexibility.

This condition affects nearly 3 million Americans. The findings also raise concerns about the broader impact of corticosteroids, commonly used in treating asthma in children, on skeletal maturation. This crossover from evolutionary research to human health underscores the broad and unexpected applications of the DinoChicken project, demonstrating how studying ancient traits in birds can yield critical insights into human biology and disease.

**Research Yields Surprising Results**
The unexpected outcomes of the DinoChicken project serve as a potent reminder of the value of exploratory research, no matter how unconventional.

This venture, rooted in the quest to understand the evolution from dinosaurs to modern birds, has unveiled insights with far-reaching implications. Such instances highlight how the pursuit of knowledge, even in seemingly niche or esoteric fields, can lead to breakthroughs that resonate beyond their original context.

DinoChicken underscores a fundamental truth about scientific inquiry: knowledge is an ever-expanding frontier, and each new piece of information can open pathways we never knew existed, reminding us of our capacity for innovation and adaptation. It is this relentless curiosity and the willingness to venture into the unknown that continues to propel mankind forward, unlocking solutions to some of our most pressing challenges and enriching our understanding of the universe around us.

All that said, I’ll have a Jurassic Park themed chicken coop ready for as many CreataceousCluckers as I can afford.

Reference Links for Further Study:
Clemson Edu
Livescience.com
Our 2024 Guest of Honor will be Richard Kadrey, author of the Sandman Slim series.

Our Featured Music Guest will be Bonnie Gordon

Check out the extensive listing of music performers we have lineup for Confluence weekend!

Early Bird registration is open! Rates increase on March 1, 2024. Get your Confluence membership now and save $$!

Visit Confluence for more information

PARSEC INK'S: TRIANGULATION

The annual Triangulation anthology is open for submissions!
The theme for the 21st anthology is Hospitium
Speculative fiction stories up to 5,000 words will be considered. Payment is .03 cents word.
Speculative fiction poetry accepted-up to 100 lines. Payment .25 cents a line.
Submissions will close on February 29th, 2024
Visit the website for full submission requirements.

WRITEING WORKSHOPS & EVENTS

Write or Die (WorD) Joins Parsec

The Write or Die (WorD) writing and critique group is now a part of the Parsec Inc., Workshop committee.
WorD meets the 2nd and 4th Tuesday each month from 6:45-9:00 pm. A Zoom option is available for those that cannot make the in-person 4th Tues meeting at the Mt.Lebanon public library. Check the WorD website for MORE INFO
WRITE ON TIME: A Speculative Fiction Adult Workshop! Sundays, 7–9 p.m. ET, Jan. 28–Mar. 3.
This 6-week workshop will examine different methods of altering time in stories, from those as literal as time travel to more subtle uses such as non-linear timelines and omitted time. Tickets are $100. Discounts available. email: info@writepittsburgh.com TICKETS
First, don't be fooled by the title, this is not, Not, NOT a kids book. The Adams in this story has nothing to do with the Addams Family comedies. Let's Go Play at the Adams' is a compelling, transgressive psychological horror novel first published in 1974 written by Mendal W. Johnson. Because the writer passed away after this only work of his to be published, the book went out of print for 40 years. Some believe the writer died of heavy drinking due to this novel; giving it the reputation of “the book that killed it's own author.” When out of print, copies of the book went for as much as $600. In 2020 the book was picked up by Valancourt Books as a part of its Paperbacks from Hell collection. The paperback is about $20, and the limited-edition hardback is about $100. It’s also available in Kindle for about $10.

This story takes place around 1970 in rural Maryland. The Father is a doctor and makes good money. The Adams parents own enough land alongside a river that it's a quarter-mile to the nearest neighbor. They have two children, Cindy (10) and Bobby (13.) In order to go on a summer 2 week trip to Europe the parents hire a pretty college student Barbara (20, a child development major, who is kind and idealistic) to babysit the kids.

The two Adams kids with three neighboring teens Paul (13), John (16), and Dianne (17), have a secret club called the Freedom Five (freedom from adult control.) They meet and vote on games to play. One is a prisoner of war game where one kid plays an enemy prisoner and the others are the captors.

The first days of the babysitting job go well – they play, swim, and do chores. But then the kids have a secret meeting; “let's make the babysitter our prisoner of war.” At night they drug her. Next morning, she awakens tied spread eagle to her bed with a wash rag taped in her mouth. At least one of the kids is always on guard duty to sound the alarm if she starts to escape. The war prisoner is put on a bread and water diet, one hand freed to eat, and is hobbled and choke-leashed for trips to the bathroom. Anytime she tries to reason with the kids the gag goes back in. If anyone phones then “everything is fine” and the babysitter is said to be out swimming or in the shower. Within days the novelty of managing a prisoner 24 hours a day becomes a chore in itself. The kids have another meeting on how to liven things up again. “Wouldn't it be funny if the babysitter was naked?” The oldest girl Dianne takes charge of the scissor-work. With a week remaining until the parents return, that allows plenty of time (and remaining half of the book) for things to get worse, much worse.

The story is slow in places as the writer spends time in each of the characters' heads. Psychology, philosophy, sociology, politics, and human nature are examined on multiple levels. It's likely the writer drew on psychology research like the 1961 Yale Milgram, and the 1971 Stanford Prison experiments. Inspiration may have come from other works such as Lord of the Flies (1954) and perhaps even the Sylvia Likens true crime case (1965 Indiana), In turn I think this novel may have been inspiration for Stephen King's short story Children of the Corn (1977).

The story is disturbing yet critics agree it has literary merit. Some readers flag the book as DNF (Did Not Finish) The YouTuber Slime and Slashers in her January 2023 video Top 10 Most Disturbing Books I've Read So Far ranks LGPATA as #1. I give this book a 4/5. though I calculated a meta-rating of 3.49/5 from 3233 scores.
Happy news from Mary Soon Lee:
My poem "Dispatches from the Dragon's Den," first published in *Star*Line, has been nominated for the Rhysling Award. N.B. Under the new system, nomination doesn't necessarily mean the poem will appear in the Rhysling anthology -- the nominees will be pared down to a shorter list of finalists. 

Sign up to receive Mary's Newsletter

From Christine Benner Dixon:
YOUTH POETS: Our Sci-Fi and STEAM mini-issue of *Starry False Lily* is out! Check out the poignant contributions of three local teen poets. [DOWNLOAD THE PDF HERE]

From Rigel Ailur:
Coming in February: a kickstarter for a spectacular book due to publish in July 2024. In this anthology *Shifting, Swirling HERitage*, explore the shifting, swirling history that forms our culture. Enjoy these tales of "What If..." that show us the results of time flowing very differently. Some delve into the far distant past millennia ago; others deal with far more immediate events, even jumping to the future. The common thread running through all of them: each change causes, or at least leads to, a major and permanent shift in society that improves women's lives and social standing. These stories embrace hope, idealism, and optimism. The power of positivity and perseverance prevails. [VISIT KICKSTARTER]

From Donald Firesmith:
My alien dystopia novel, *Hell Holes: A Slave's Revenge*, has advanced from the short list to the semifinals in the Cygnus Science Fiction Book Contest. I'm not sure when they will announce the finalists, but the winner will be named on August 24th. [READ MORE]
A Farewell Note from Bill Hall
Sigma readers, hello and goodbye. I've been Parsec secretary for 17 years and I've chosen to retire. It's been a good run. It was relatively easy for me so long as I lived just a few blocks away from the Squirrel Hill Library, but today I have received confirmation that I can make a new home elsewhere in Pittsburgh. I'll still be around – I remain a member, and I look forward to attending whatever meetings I can in person – but I refuse to guarantee that I can show up anymore for each and every meeting. Browsing my computer, I find over 180 files on meetings, picnics, Christmas parties, and Confluences, and I'm sure I've lost a few along the way. I look forward to living to witness another 180 chapters in the evolution of Parsec. Let's go on writing those chapters.
Ex-Secretary Bill Hall

Thank you to this month's contributors!

If anyone would like to be the newsletter editor, please contact me. We really need a newsletter editor. Soon. Please.

And now we find ourselves in need of a new Monthly Meeting secretary.
If anyone is up for either of these positions, please contact us at: newsletter@parsec-sff.org.
Anyone? Bueller? Anyone?

Editor ad nauseam, Karen Yun-Lutz

If you would like to know who the current Board of Directors or Committee officers are, you can find them on the ABOUT page of the Parsec website.
If you want to unsubscribe, click here.