

OPUNTIA

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OPUNTIA is published by Dale Speirs, Box 6830, Calgary, Alberta, Canada, T2P 2E7. It is available for \$3 cash for a one-time sample copy, trade for your zine, or letter of comment. Americans: please don't send cheques for small amounts to Canada as the bank fee to cash them is usually more than the amount. US\$ banknotes are acceptable in Canada at par value; what we gain on the exchange rate we lose on the higher postage rate to USA. Do not send mint USA stamps as they are not valid for postage outside USA and I don't collect them.

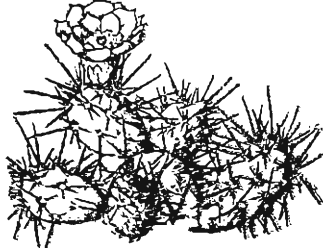
Whole-numbered OPUNTIA's are sercon, x.1 issues are reviewzines, x.2 issues are indexes, and x.5 issues are perzines.

COVER ART: This 1982 postage stamp depicts *Opuntia dillenii*, a Caribbean species.

I ALSO HEARD FROM: Daer Pozo Ramirez, Diane Bertrand, Jose Sechi, Phlox Icona, Christoph Meyer, Bruce Pelz, Scott Crow, Henry Welch, John Held Jr, J. Ricart, Roman Castenholz, Pascal Lenoir, Joseph Nicholas, Peter Netmail, Karen Johnson, Antonio Kruger, and two people with illegible signatures and no return addresses.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

[Editor's
remarks
in square
brackets]



FROM: Robert Lichtman
Box 30
Glen Ellen, California 95442

2001-09-07

[Re: mention of early zinester Edith Minitier] She was indeed a trailblazer in the world of amateur journalism. Although she wasn't the first, she was the most prominent female ayjay participant in its early days. Much is made of her in Truman J. Spencer's 1957 book, THE HISTORY OF AMATEUR JOURNALISM. He writes:

"Almost from the beginning of amateur journalism, girls as well as boys engaged in its activities, wrote poems and stories, edited papers, and even printed journals. Several of them were elected to responsible offices in the National Association and, as has been recorded, Miss Susan Robbins, in the absence of superior officers, called one convention to order and presided for a brief time. But

during the first third of a century of its existence no woman was elected as its chief executive. This honor was conferred upon Mrs. Edith Dowe Minter at the New York convention of 1909.”

“Edith May Dowe, as she was then, entered amateur journalism at the age of 13, when she issued the WORCESTER AMATEUR, and when 15, she was one of the first girl amateurs to attend a convention of the Association of which she was later to become President. She published many different papers, all characterized by a delightful humour and a brilliant wit, in all of which there was not a trace of malice or desire to hurt. But her chief fame rested upon her work as an author of serials and short stories. In the field of a certain type of fiction she had no equal in the history of amateur journalism. Her quickened facility of observation, seeing all the minute peculiarities of human nature, her penetration into the inner life of persons of various times, her salient humour, and her graphic power of expression combined to put her in the front rank of authors.”

“She attended many conventions of the national and state and local associations, was one of the leading spirits in the long career of the Hub Amateur Journalists Club of Boston, and in 1895, when Albert W. Dennis resigned the official editorship, she was appointed Official Editor of the National, and issued the NATIONAL AMATEUR in a capable manner.”

I count myself fortunate to possess copies of Ken Faig's two enormous compendiums of Edith Minter's writings, his 1995 GOING HOME and last year's COAST OF BOHEMIA. In addition to her writing, both volumes contain laudatory remarks about her by a wide range of contributors, including H.P. Lovecraft. These books were published in editions of only 100 copies and are long out of print, but Faig makes available their text in disk form at a reasonable cost.

[Ken Faig Jr can be contacted at 2311 Swainwood Drive, Glenview, Illinois 60025-2741.]

FROM: David Glashan
Medicine Hat, Alberta

2001-07-23

The Medicine Hat Zine Party happened July 15 and 16 at the Treehouse Community Art Space (530 - 4 Avenue NE) and was put on by the Treehouse Collective. It featured two panel discussions; "Gender and zines", and "Zines and the politicization of all-ages space". There were workshops on feminist organizing in the all-ages scene, silkscreening, creative activism and radical cheerleading, comic book making, vegetarian cooking, and studio photography.

The zines and gender panel discussion was frustrating for a lot of people. It is difficult to address sexism and patriarchy, and the conversation was often heated. Not much was resolved in the end. For the most part the party was a success. Participants had a good time, zines were made, traded, and bought, and new friends were made. The success of the zine party can be measured by the extent that it strengthens the people who make zines together.

FROM: Lloyd Penney 2001-08-09
1706 - 24 Eva Road
Etobicoke, Ontario M9C 2B2

I always enjoy the goddess *Opuntia* covers. Now we see where Teddy Harvia's mind is going.

Even with some media fans telling me my zines weren't real zines, there were a few who did show some interest, and perhaps one who might ask how to get them. I'm happy to show the zines to them, even if they might not be interested in taking part. I don't think any of these panels have borne any fruit yet, but if asked, I'll probably continue to do them. I think that as paper zines become more and more an esoteric part of fandom, fewer people will know about them, and the idea of doing a fanzine panel won't come to the minds of those in charge of convention programming.

FROM: Terry Jeeves 2001-08-12
56 Red Scar Drive
Scarborough, North Yorkshire YO12 5RQ
England

I loved the Teddy Harvia cartoon covers.

Re: a fanzine library, I reckon it should have lists, anecdotes, and whatever else proves interesting as far as fanzine loans go. Greg Pickersgill runs the Memory Hole for old fanzines.

[His address is: Greg Pickersgill, 3 Bethany Row, Narberth Road, Haverfordwest, Pembrokeshire SA61 2XG, Wales. He accepts unwanted fanzines for the Memory Hole library, and will arrange disposal of duplicate zines to other collectors.]

FROM: Carolyn Clowes 2001-08-19
547 Dover Road
Louisville, Kentucky 40206

Another great Teddy Harvia cover, which suggests to me one or two things not to do with an *Opuntia*.

I was on five panels at Conglomeration 2001 (August 10 to 12), replacing Louisville's RiverCon. "Fan fiction and shared worlds" was made lively by the presence of Mike Resnick in the back row, who sees fan fiction as nothing more than copyright infringement. "Why write about that bald guy on Star Trek? Get your own bald guy!". We discussed the legalities of shared worlds, copyrights, trademarks, and outright plagiarism. Some panelists and audience members became offended. Several undermined their position with statements like "But the writers betrayed the characters!", to which Mike replied "Their characters, not yours!"

Yes, Mike is arrogant, opinionated, one of the nicest fellows around, and has been making a living with his pen for over forty years. He has little patience with proprietary fans who feel that liking someone's creation gives them the right to mess with it. He's right, and I completely get his point. Mine was this: If some reader tries to turn a profit from my work, I'll be upset, but most fan fiction doesn't do that. Fans who are aspiring writers should listen to Mike and get their own ideas. But most fans don't have their own ideas. For them, writing is a fan activity, like costuming or role-playing, not a real threat to authors.

[There is a similar thing in the academic world, where researchers resent others poaching on their topic, and live in fear that someone else will pip them at the post by publishing first. A good example is Watson and Crick's race to decipher the structure of DNA.]

FROM: Chester Cuthbert
Winnipeg, Manitoba

2001-08-12

A history of SF fan dealers would be useful for fans and collectors, but few people would be capable of compiling one, except Forry Ackerman (who would have no time for the task), or completist collectors (few of whom have the capital to continue with today's massive output and inflation). Most of the early dealers were fans, but modern dealers are more interested in money than in the material.

FROM: A. Langley Searles
48 Highland Circle
Bronxville, New York 10708

2001-12-19

I don't agree that people are generally anti-science. Perhaps there was a wave of uneasiness over explosives and poison gas after WW1 (this was a chemist's war), but except for SF pulps this died out rapidly. Du Pont's advertising slogan during the 1930s was "Better things for better living through chemistry". After WW2 there was a comparable undercurrent against anything with nuclear in the name (WW2 was a physicist's war). The great majority of the citizenry regarded science as beneficial, never being against radio and television, packaged cake and bread mixes, or wash-and-wear fabrics.

The resistance to genetically-altered foods (biology is the current culprit) seems the nearest to a widespread concern of any scientific work during the 20th century. I share this myself, but until a few years have elapsed we don't know how this is going to play out; it's risky to extrapolate a major trend.

Yes, minorities have opposed pasteurization of milk, fluoridation of water, vaccination against smallpox and polio, but at the same time they have embraced antibiotics, adding calcium and vitamin D to orange juice, and nylon stockings. That doesn't constitute being anti-scientific; it means they don't know what science is. Raymond van Houten's "Pro-Science Movement" was a minuscule part of the SF microcosm, and died aborning. The trouble is that due to poor education, people just don't know what science is, and therefore (to borrow a phrase from Arthur Clarke) they find science indistinguishable from magic.

ZINE LISTINGS

by Dale Speirs

[The Usual means \$2 or \$3 cash, trade for your zine, or letter of comment on a previous issue. Americans: please don't send cheques for small amounts to Canada or overseas (the bank fee to cash them is usually more than the amount) or mint USA stamps (which are not valid for postage outside USA). US\$ banknotes are acceptable around the world.]

28 Pages Bound With Twine #1: (US\$2 from -6-
Christopher Meyer, Box 106, Danville, Ohio 43014)

A mix of handprinted and typed essays and collages, bound with haybale twine, not stapled. An excellent example to show budding zinesters who think they need the latest in desktop publishing. Essays include a paean on postage stamps, including an actual stamp stuck in on the page. Also letters to companies about their products and the replies and a few book reviews.

ABV #2 (The Usual from Vicki Rosenzweig, 33 Indian Road, 6-R, New York City, New York 10034) Published by a trans-Atlantic editorial collective. Starts off with a thoughtful essay on the fannish gift economy (of which "The Usual" is an example), which, unfortunately, many neos can't or won't understand. Even more frightening is another account about teaching SF to a generation ignorant of science. Elsewhere are personal stories and letters of comment.

The Fossil V99#1 (US\$15 per annum from The Fossils Inc, c/o Gary Bossler, 145 Genoa Avenue SW, Massilon, Ohio 44646) A clubzine with emphasis on the people involved in the history of amateur press associations. There are far too many zinesters today who think zines first became popular in the 1970s, but in fact the earliest mass movement of amateur publishing was in the late 1800s. This issue is mostly devoted to an interview with a zinester who began publishing in the 1930s.

Torcon 3 Progress Report #1 (Torcon 3, Box 3, Station A, Toronto, Ontario M5W 1A2) Toronto will host the 2003 World Science Fiction Convention. This first report has the basic details on Guests of Honour (all Americans, not one Canuck), hotel sites, and detailed membership statistics. For current membership information, you can visit their Web site at www.torcon3.on.ca.

Silkscreen (US\$3? from Violet Jones, Box 55336, Hayward, California 94545) This chapbook explains how to print zines using silkscreening. It is obvious from reading through it that Jones' advice is based on practical experience in dealing with not only the basic process but all the nuances that other guidebooks might miss. Well recommended for those interested in the printing side of zine production.

The Thought #126 to #128 (The Usual from Ronald Tobin, Box 10760, Glendale, Arizona 85318-0760) Issue #126 is a memorial to Toronto zinester Cliff Kennedy, who died suddenly too young on May 27, 2001, with tributes from a variety of people who knew him. The main article of this issue is an extended book review on macroeconomics that dissects the refusal of economists to accept the real world. Also essays on a variety of subjects and letters of comment. Issue #127 is largely given over to thinking about the consequences of the World Trade Centre disaster, such as the mad rush to bolt the stable doors after the horses kicked the stableboys to death. Where was Echelon when it was really needed?

Musea #101 to #105 (The Usual from Tom Hendricks, 4000 Hawthorne #5, Dallas, Texas 75219) Come The Revolution, this zine knows what is to be done in the art world. Advice on independent film-making, music, traffic calming, and Sony's fake reviewers who give its products favourable mention. Also zine reviews.

Plokta #24 (The Usual from Alison Scott, 24 St. Mary Road, Walthamstow, London E17 9RG) Personal notes ranging from hunting pigeons with water guns to riding a tandem bicycle to a wedding with programme items. An essay on the Citroen DS and letters of comment.

Aztec Blue #5 (The Usual from Murray Moore, 1065 Henley Road, Mississauga, Ontario L4Y 1C8) SF fannish history, with an account of fun business cards, an appreciation of Boyd Raeburn (1927-2001), with a reprint of one of his essays, and lots of letters of comment.

Erg #155 and #156 (The Usual from Terry Jeeves, 56 Red Scar Drive, Scarborough, North Yorkshire YO12 5RQ, England) Down memory lane with reminiscences about early British SF conventions, then accounts about weird aircraft that never made it, unanswered scientific questions, some whining about how complicated modern life is, and letters of comment.

World Wide Party #9: (Dale Speirs, Box 6830, Calgary, Alberta T2P 2E7, Canada) On June 21st, year 2002, will be the 9th annual World Wide Party. At 21h00 your time, raise a glass and toast your friends in the Papernet around the world. Have a party, do a one-shot zine, post a batch of mail art, or whatever else you may think of. The World Wide Party was first suggested by Benoit Girard of Quebec and boosted by Franz Miklis of Austria. The idea behind a 21h00 toast is to get a wave circling the planet celebrating zineish friends and connecting everyone in the Papernet briefly by a common activity. Write to me how you celebrated WWP #9; documentation to all.

Insects: (Yves Monissen, 11 Avenue Bon Air, 1332 Genval, Belgium) Insects and garbage cans, no butterflies. No deadline, maximum size 16 x 23 cm.

Ready-made Mail Art And Money Do Mix Project: (Anna Banana, RR 22, 3747 Highway 101, Roberts Creek, British Columbia V0N 2W2) When ultraviolet light is shone on a Canadian \$10 bill, an image appears that makes them discernable from fakes. What do you think the Royal Canadian Mint has put on its \$10 bill? Is it a different image for a \$5, a \$20, a \$50, a \$100? Send your design for the invisible image on the Canadian dollar today to the Bank of Bananada.

Arthole: (Boog, Box 1313, Lawrence, Kansas 66044) @RtH*Le is a new correspondence assembling magazine. To participate, send 5 to 20 copies of your two-dimensional (more or less) graphic work, 5.5" x 8.5" (A5) in size. Please allow 2 cm (3/4") on short side; two-sided is good. Each @RtH*Le will be unique. It will include mail art news, artistamps, original works from other artists around the world, and personal correspondence.

World Storage (Daer Pozo Ramirez, Jose Marti 78, Buenaventura, Holguin, 82 600 Cuba) I'd like to ask you for examples of your play for World Storage and I also invite you to display your work in my country. Here you have a friend.

Intercambio Exchange (Amnesia, C.C. 8 (c.p. B 1742 IJB), Buenos Aires, Argentina) Send 20 postcards, open theme and technique. Maximum size 10 x 15 cm. Deadline February 28, 2002. Answer to all.

The Working Life: (Ginger Mason, Box 39168, Vancouver, British Columbia V6R 1G0) Show me/tell me about your work. Is it a means to an end? Does it give you pleasure? Are you doing the work you want to do? Does your vision match your reality? Free medium, documentation to all. Deadline February 2002.

Hot August Night III: (Owen Plummer, #17 - 1455 West 8th Avenue, Vancouver, British Columbia V6H 1C9) A tribute to Neil Diamond. Send art, any media or technique. Deadline July 15, 2002. Documentation and exhibition at Lucky's Comics (Vancouver).

Comforters: (Lois Klassen, Box 74540, Vancouver, British Columbia V6K 4P4) Send me quilt squares (6" x 6") to be used on the top of comforters that I am making for displaced people (refugees). The comforters, also known as blankets or quilts, will be distributed by the Mennonite Central Committee, the Red Cross, and the Red Crescent societies. The squares can incorporate artwork but they must be washable and durable; poly-cotton is the best material. Send as many as you want because each comforter needs 130! I will return photos and periodical documentation about the project.

Erik Satie: (Jean Hugues, 46 Rue de Gesvres, 60000 Beauvais, France) Do you like his music? That French composer was born in Honfleur in 1866. He worked with the greatest; Picasso, Picabia, Braque, Cocteau, Rene Clair. He influenced artists as prestigious as Debussy, Ravel, or Stravinsky. In his most famous creations, you can find 'Les Gymnopedies', 'Les Gnossiennes'. Please send me your mail art in A4 sheet size (21 cm x 30 cm), Any technique allowed.

Think Here: (Jose Roberto Sechi, Av. M29, N° 2183, Jd. Sao Joao, Rio Claro SP - 13505 - 410, Brazil) Mail art magazine. Drawing, design, painting, engraving, gluing, rubber stamp, writing, poetry, visual poetry, photograph, etc.. In black and white, please, maximum 13 cm x 8 cm (horizontal format). Theme free, no return, no jury, no deadline, documentation to every 18 participants.

Stampzine: (Picasso Gaglione, 5033 North Mozart Street, Chicago, Illinois 60625) STAMPZINE is edited and published by Picasso Gaglione and friends. It is an assembling collection of rubber stamp art, featuring the handstamped works of international artists. To contribute, send 75 handstamped copies of 8.5 x 11 rubber stamp artwork. All contributors will receive a free copy.

The Tree Of Poetry: (dott.ssa Tiziana Baracchi, Via Cavallotti, 83-B, 30171 Venezia-Mestre, Italy) The Tree of Poetry is a very uncommon species of plant; it is an American maple which is in Venezia-Mestre in 83/B Cavallotti Street, Itinerari '80 Centre. Giancarlo Da Lio dedicated this tree to poetry in a lot of artistic performances. Below its fronds, sheets with verses, in plastic envelopes to preserve from rain, hang down. The poets read their lines in the shade of the tree. Itinerari '80 is an artistic movement; from different trends many excellent artists

gather strength around Giancarlo Da Lio. Moreover, as well as they work, they must manage their work making use of everything and everywhere. Well, it is necessary to show works not only in the official galleries, but above all in the alternative art spaces: where people go and come, on the road, in the shops, in the gardens too; so the Tree of Poetry was born and is growing. Do you want to send your mail art or mail poetry?

Photo Exchange: (Scott Garinger, Box 321, El Segundo, California 90245-0321) Will trade photographs, any subject.

Collage d'aujourd'hui: (Dianne Bertrand, Art terre, 9109 Deschambault, Saint Leonard, Quebec, H1R 2C6) Mail art collage.

Brain Cell Fractal: (Ryosuke Cohen, 3-76-I-A-613, Yagumokitacho, Moriguchi-City, Osaka 570, Japan) Send 150 stickers or some other type of small mail art image. These are collated into a collage on an 11" x 17" poster, and a copy sent back to each contributor, along with a list of names and addresses of those participating.

Artist Trading Cards: (Chuck Stake, 736 - 5 Street NW, Calgary, Alberta T2N 1P9, Canada) ATCs are works of art created on 64 mm x 89 mm card stock. They are the same size as hockey trading cards, but the similarity stops here. Cards may

depict anything, be 2-D or 3-D, they may be original, a series, an edition, or a multiple. Cards are signed on the back by the artist and, if necessary, an edition number is included. ATCs are paintings, drawings, collages, photographs, rubberstamp works, mixed-media, etchings, found images, recycled works of art, assemblages, etcetera. The only stipulation is that the card fits in the standard plastic sheets that hockey cards are normally stored within.

BOOK REVIEWS

by Dale Speirs

A review of **Benedict Arnold: The Canadian Connection** by Louis Quigley (Queue Publishing, 2000, ISBN 0-968-7010-0-0, trade paperback, 80 pages). Some people are lucky and have their name immortalized by their inventions. Bunsen had his burner, for instance. Others have their names become an exemplar, to point a moral or adorn a tale, as Samuel Johnson put it. In all of history, there are only three names which are instantly recognizable as synonyms for traitor: Judas Iscariot, Benedict Arnold, and Quisling.

The American Congress tried to enlist Canadians on the side of the revolution, but failed. Not for the last time, they didn't understand that their northern neighbours did not consider

themselves hard done by the British overlords, at least not enough to throw in their lot with the Yankees. Congress shot itself in the foot by sending out two propaganda leaflets, one to Canada and the other to Britain. The Canadian one urged the people there to liberate themselves from their foreign King. The one circulated in Britain urged the English to rid themselves of the Papists in the New World by letting the Americans do the job of ethnic cleansing. Unfortunately it never occurred to the pamphleteers that there was mail service between Britain and Canada, and that British Catholics would quickly send copies of the pamphlet back across the ocean to warn their compatriots. Canada was 95% Catholic at the time, mostly French but also lots of Irish and Scots. (Today Canada is 50% Catholic.)

Benedict Arnold was born in 1741 in Connecticut, and joined the American revolutionaries in 1774. His first connection with Canada was an attack he led in late 1775 against Quebec. It failed because it was made too late in the season, and the supply logistics were shoddy. Arnold later helped win the Battle of Saratoga (1777-10-17). Had his career ended there, he would have been remembered as a great hero of the American Revolution.

Instead, in 1780, he went over to the British cause. He had always been an argumentative man who rubbed people the wrong way, which cost him goodwill when he got into trouble over a supply scandal. Bitter at this, and lack of recognition for his victories, he

went to the King's side. As Quigley notes in this book: "*When Benedict Arnold joined the British, he was immediately appointed to the rank of Brigadier General. Having already served the Patriots at the rank of Major General, he is probably the only person in history to have served at the rank of general on opposing sides in the same war.*"

After the end of the war in 1781, he fled to England. He wasn't happy there, and went to New Brunswick in 1785 to join the Loyalists. He became a successful businessman but was unpopular with the Loyalists, although his wife Peggy was well loved by her neighbours. His fellow Canadians were suspicious of him because he was a turncoat, even if he did turn to their side. Nobody likes a snitch. More importantly, he was intolerant and abusive of his neighbours, and fought numerous lawsuits with them. In 1791, he decided to return to England after a mob of Loyalists burned his effigy in front of his house. He died in London in 1801 at age 60.

Quigley concludes his biography of Arnold by contemplating alternative histories, but fails to deal with them. It is not enough to raise what-ifs; one must also attempt an answer to them. Further, some of Quigley's what-ifs are unrealistic; pigs will fly sooner than Arnold become a diplomatic politician. I append my responses below to each of Quigley's what-ifs.

“WHAT IF? Arnold, without authority and against orders, had not thrown himself into the fray at the Second Battle of Saratoga? In defeating the flower of the British Army, this victory convinced Royalist France to formally ally itself with America. Without France’s substantial contribution and support, it is likely that England would have quelled the revolution.”

Speirs: The revolution may have been drawn out longer, but the basic military fact must be faced that Britain had incredibly long supply lines and was facing a hostile populace on their own territory. The Canadians were not interested in getting involved (“Hell no, George, we won’t go!”).

“WHAT IF? ‘Admiral’ Arnold had not engaged the British navy on Lake Champlain with a makeshift flotilla and inexperienced sailors? Although aware he could not win, he led the attack against a vastly superior force with such ferocity, and inflicted such damage, that the British were forced to withdraw to Canada for the winter months, thus buying much valuable time for the Revolutionaries to organize and build up their forces for the coming campaigns.”

Speirs: Plausible, and would have extended the war.

“WHAT IF? During the assault on Canada, Congress had heeded Arnold’s urgent pleas for reinforcements to permit an all out

assault on the British stronghold of Quebec; and what if, simultaneously, Arnold had been successful in convincing large numbers of Quebecois to join his army? Would Canada have become the fourteenth star on the flag of the new Republic?”

Speirs: To address the first half, any plausible attack runs up against the failure of the Americans to attack before winter set in, and the problem of volunteers whose enlistments expired January 1. The second half is implausible because the Canadians, while not interesting in fighting for the King, were certainly not going to go over to anti-Catholic bigots.

“WHAT IF? Members of the Continental Congress had the astuteness to recognize Arnold’s value as a military hero, instead of heaping abuse and humiliation on their wunderkind for the relatively unimportant allegations of impropriety leveled against him? Aided by the unswerving support of his longtime admirer and mentor, Commander-in-Chief George Washington, would he have gone on to further greatness and power, perhaps even as future president? President benedict Arnold; it has a certain ring to it. And stranger things have happened.”

Speirs: Unlikely, because of Arnold’s intemperate personality, which cost him continually. To get ahead in politics, one must good at wheeling and dealing. (Even Nixon smiled a lot and was

polite in public, no matter what he was like in private.) Arnold was stubborn and quick to argue, both traits that are ultimately self-defeating in politics. He made too many enemies in his life, and kept making them even in the face of experience.

THE GREATEST INVENTION OF ALL

Review of **Alpha Beta** by John Man (Hodder Headline, 2000, ISBN 0-7472-7136-4, hardcover, 310 pages). The greatest invention of the human race was language, first only spoken, then written. Writing separates us from all other animals and triggered civilization to develop beyond the village level, since it allows communication at a distance not only in space but in time. Written language allows generalization. Memorization of vast amounts of data is done by association with specific things, but there is a limit. With sheets of papyrus side by side, one can contemplate generalities without being forced to divert time and energy into remembering masses of numbers or lists of names and places.

Many methods of writing were developed, but the alphabet, surpassed syllabics, hieroglyphics, and pictographs. John Man covers the origin and development of the alphabet in the western world, the only place where the alphabet developed independently and that only once. He places the origin in ancient Egypt, and follows its spread along the trade routes to the rest of the Mediterranean and thence to Asia. China had its ideographs, but

they are not as efficient and easy to use as an alphabet. Even today there are some people who develop new international languages based on pictographs or ideographs on the false premise that images are superior to words. But images are culture specific and their meaning vanishes over time. Written words following a set of rules can be deciphered thousands of years later, though the culture and language that produced them have long disappeared.

Languages change over deep time. When the American government had to plan for warning signs to last 10,000 years at a nuclear waste depository, they were faced with an impossibility. Pictures can be mis-interpreted to a barbaric culture that might survive into the future; is a raised hand a warning to stop or a greeting of friendship?

Writing and civilization go together; barbarians get along without either of them. Syllabic systems such as cuniforms, hieroglyphics, and Chinese can only survive if their culture does, which is why only the latter exists today. The Babylonians and ancient Egyptians are long gone, but the Chinese kept their culture going, sometimes by a thread, but still going despite warlords and barbarian invasions. John Man argues that Judaism exists and survived where other more dominant religions did not because it has its own alphabet, which let uniformity be established in both space and time among Jews.

John Man proposes three laws for the origin and development of writing:

- 1) In a writing system, complexity knows no bounds and imposes none.
- 2) A writing system will last as long as its culture, unless changed by force.
- 3) New writing systems emerge only in new, young, ambitious cultures.

Of the alphabets and languages that have spread worldwide into a variety of cultures, the Roman and Cyrillic alphabets have been most successful. There may be more people who use Chinese in absolute terms, but their written language is culture specific, whereas Latin, French, and nowadays English were able to spread into other cultures. The Roman alphabet surpassed all other alphabets and dominates the world today. Its only major competitor is Cyrillic (not invented by St. Cyril, by the way, contrary to popular belief). But early on, Cyrillic cut itself off not only from European culture but the past history of the Slavs themselves. This was fine for the missionaries wanted to eradicate paganism and start afresh with Christianity, but it left Slavdom trying to re-invent its roots and never really succeeding.

The alphabets of the world all have their illogical letters and sounds. The only one that approaches perfection is the Korean

alphabet designed by the scholar Sejong. The ultimate success of English is due to its ability to absorb words from other languages and to tolerate poor useage, no matter how much the schoolmarms may rant against nouncing the verb, verbing the noun, and acronymizing new words.

Why was the alphabet so successful? John Man borrows the concept of the selfish gene from Richard Dawkins, and proposes that alphabets are memes, self-propagating ideas that overwhelm less virulent forms of writing. They spread like a virus from ancient Egypt, mutating from modified hieroglyphics and adopted by marginal societies that found them superior and with less cultural baggage than established systems.

From Egypt, the idea of the alphabet went to Phoenicia, then to Greece. It was a bottom-up revolution, as the utility of an alphabet was best appreciated by shopkeepers, ship owners, and front-line bureaucrats. The upper echelons, who did not have to deal with the details, saw no need of it, as they were not the ones who actually had to keep track of sheep sales or how many amphorae of wine were to go to Tyre. For the Greeks, the killer app was Homer. Much has been made of the fact that ancient poets memorized huge epics, but they did so from necessity. There is no doubt that Homer would be forgotten today had his works not been transcribed into a Greek alphabet. (Incidentally, John Man disposes of the myth of the blind bard; there is no solid

evidence that Homer was blind.) The new generations saw no need to memorize if pieces of papyrus could save them the trouble. Better yet, an alphabet allows transmission of knowledge to future generations as yet unborn without the need for a teacher to drill a student by rote.

GREAT MOMENTS IN FISHING

Review of *A Fish Caught In Time* by Samantha Weinberg (Fourth Estate Ltd, England, 2000, ISBN 1-85702-907-0, trade paperback, 242 pages) In December 1938, a young woman, who was curator of the equally young East London Museum of South Africa, received a telephone call from a local fisherman that he had some new specimens she might be interested in for her collections. Marjorie Courtenay-Latimer went down to the docks and poked around in the holds. She came across one large specimen which was unlike any fish she had ever seen or even heard tell of. It had stubby limbs instead of fins, and the split tail had another stub dividing it, like a puppy's tail.

She sent a message to Dr. J.L.B. Smith at Rhodes University. He recognized it as a coelacanth, a fish presumed extinct since about the time the dinosaurs died out 65 million years ago. That in itself was mildly fascinating, but what vaulted it to the front pages of newspapers around the world was that coelacanths are one of three groups of fish believed to be ancestral to land animals. What was

a coelacanth doing off the South African coast 65 megayears out of time?

Smith named the coelacanth *Latimeria chalumnae* and began a long search to find more specimens. He recognized immediately that the specimen had been a stray swept down by currents from the East African coastline. The South African coast was so heavily fished for decades that it was not possible the coelacanth could have been missed by fishermen if it were native to the area.

It wasn't until 1952 that a second coelacanth was caught, this time in the Comoros islands, halfway between the northern tip of Madagascar and northern Mozambique. Smith had leafleted the eastern Africa fishing villages with thousands of multilingual posters offering a L100 reward for any coelacanth. This was a fortune to native fishermen, and it said something for how scare coelacanths were in the nets that it wasn't until 1952 that one was caught.

Over the next few decades, coelacanths became a national industry in the Comoros. Just as importantly, the fish were a matter of national prestige, first for the French overlords who controlled the colony, and after independence, for the Comoros republic. The islands became famous as the homeland of the coelacanths, and put the image of the fish on its postage stamps

and coins. Ichthyologists squabbled between themselves and competed to get new specimens. There were constant and futile efforts to get and keep living coelacanths so their physiology and anatomy could be studied.

What no one considered was that the Comoros are volcanic islands that rose above the sea only a few million years ago. They could not be the homeland. In due time, more coelacanths were discovered along the African coastline, which made sense. The real shocker occurred in 1997. A scientist off-duty in Indonesia was poking around a fish market when he spotted a coelacanth. What was a coelacanth doing in Indonesia? When the announcement was made and the new species described, the first response of ichthyologists was to check the maps of ocean currents. Yes, there was indeed a possibility that coelacanths could travel between the opposite ends of the Indian Ocean. But which end was their origin?

At this point the book ends, as up to date as it could be at time of going to press. We still don't know the full distribution of coelacanths. No one has seen them mating or giving birth. Indeed, it wasn't until recently that the question was settled as to whether coelacanths were egg-layers or livebearers. It turned out that they are livebearers. No one has been able to keep a coelacanth alive in captivity, and since the fish are about 150 cm long, it won't be a hobby aquarist who does it.

GREAT MOMENTS JUST STAMPING AROUND

Review of *Artistamps / Francobolli d'Artista* by James Warren Felter (Available for \$26 from Banana Productions, R.R. 22, 3747 Sunshine Coast Highway, Roberts Creek, British Columbia V0N 2W2). Trade paperback, 216 pages, fully bilingual in Italian and English.

Artistamps are pseudo-postage stamps produced by artists, not to be confused with the philatelic term 'cinderella', which refers to all non-postage stamps but is more inclusive of such things as charity labels and propaganda. All artistamps are cinderellas but not all cinderellas are artistamps. Artistamps proper date back to the Ukrainian artist Michael Hitrovo who lived through too many interesting times during the World War One era. The main growth of artistamps as a self-aware field began in the late 1960s/early 1970s, helped along by better and cheaper copy machines. Modern mail art, dating back to the 1950s, began a rapid expansion about this time as well, and artistamps were a natural part of it.

Felter gives a history of the origins and growth of artistamps. The second half of the book is a catalogue of some of the more prominent mail artists who were involved in artistamps. This book is a useful introduction to the subject.