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For past issues, bibliography, links to other skeptics, and more, check out the SORT Website:

www.quiknet.com/~kitray/index1.html

For more about the co-founders of SORT, see

www.spangenburgandmoser.com

**November/
December
SORT Meeting
Wednesday,
December 4, 2002
7:00 P.M.**

Sierra One Room
La Sierra Community Center
5325 Engle, Carmichael

The *SORTified* NEWS

“Doubt is the beginning of wisdom.”

—Clarence Darrow

Special Meeting Announcement

December 4th will be the last SORT meeting of the year. It takes the place of both the November and December regularly scheduled meetings.

SORT will return to the last Wednesday of the month with the first 2003 meeting, scheduled for January 29.

SORT Meeting, December 4

**P.C.:
POLITICAL
CORRECTNESS—
OR THOUGHT CONTROL?**

There’s nothing like a “hot potato” on a cold December evening. And this month’s SORT meeting will be serving one up, as our roundtable discussion takes up the issues raised by PC policy. It’s a complex and controversial topic that affects us all today in what we read, write, see, hear, or say. Even, perhaps, in what we allow ourselves or others to think. Bring your views and ideas and join in the conversation. As usual, free coffee (leaded and unleaded), soft drinks, cookies and other goodies will be on hand to help keep the conversation warm and inviting.

What better way to spend a winter evening?

Join us around our roundtable this month as we discuss:

“P.C.: Political Correctness—or

Thought Control?”

Remember, all SORT meetings are free and open to anyone who wishes to attend. This special November/December meeting will take place Wednesday, December 4, 7:00–9:00 p.m., Sierra One Room, La Sierra Community Center, 5325 Engle Road (between Walnut and Garfield), in Carmichael.

NOTE: See inside for the second installment on an inside look at Worldcon, the World Science-Fiction Convention, brought to you by keen observers Ruth Rezos and Ken Nahigian.

A FEW NEW BOOK NOTES



If you are a fan of the wonderfully iconoclastic H.L. Mencken you might want to pick up Terry Teachout’s new biography *The Skeptic: A Life of H.L. Mencken*, published by Harper Collins.

While not the exhaustive approach of Carl Bode’s biography of Mencken or even of Fred Hobson’s more recent bio, Teachout’s book is a crisp and efficient look at the spirited Mencken and his times. The times have changed, but in today’s world of increasing bland conformity, self-righteousness, and public and personal double think, it’s

refreshing to take another look at a truly independent mind, unfettered, explosive and often wonderfully funny.

We only have a few quibbles with the book, while Teachout manages to skirt pretty much the fashionable line of revisionist biography so popular these days when biographers often appear to only write about people they actually dislike, the shortness of the book occasionally makes the “warts and all” approach appear a little one sided in favor of the warts. Teachout appears to have a genuine fondness for his subject so we can only guess that between the time, 1992, that Teachout began his biography of Mencken and its 2002 publication date too much was written about Mencken by other writers, leaving Teachout desperate for new angles or interpretations.

Our other quibble, again perhaps due to its short length, is that although Teachout manages to give us the broad outlines of Mencken’s life he somehow doesn’t quite manage to get on his pages the same richness of Mencken’s character as either Bode or Hobson.

Still, quibbles aside it’s a good read, but perhaps best read alongside Mencken’s own delightful *Days* books, or even *My Life as Author and Editor* or *Thirty-Five Years of Newspaper Work*.

Another good read—out this month and a great gift to yourself or a friend—is Alex Boese’s *The Museum of Hoaxes*. You may have visited Boese’s website of the same name, if not do so. You can find it at www.museumof-hoaxes.com. Boese’s book is an expanded and much more portable look at some of the greatest, weirdest and funniest hoaxes to be inflicted on the always-gullible public.

ADVENTURES AT THE WORLD SCIENCE FICTION CONVENTION

September 2002: Part Two

by *Ruth Rezos & Ken Nahigian*

(The Saga continues ... In which the authors ask us to skip the part where they got lost ... And they continue through the wonderment of science fiction and brave fantasy... Here’s the second segment of Ruth and Ken’s three-part tale.)

TO RESET THE STAGE: IT WAS LABOR DAY WEEKEND AND SCIENTISTS, SCIENCE WRITERS AND SCIENCE FICTION WRITERS, READERS AND EDITORS, FANS, AND MAYBE A FEW ALIENS, GATHERED AT THE SAN JOSÉ MCENERY CONVENTION CENTER FOR THE 60TH WORLD SCIENCE FICTION CONVENTION, “WORLDCON 2002” – OR IN THE PARLANCE, CONJOSÉ.



Skip the part where we got lost on San José light rail. We were tourists.

Friday morning, shrugging off a sleep debt, we staggered from the tram and into the McEnery. Grabbing a copy of the *Dot.Con Daily*, the official newsletter of the convention, Ken scanned for schedule changes. Nothing drastic. Our first lecture that day was the *Real Speed of Light*, by Cliff Stoll, writer and amateur scientist. Can we describe him? A whirlwind, a firecracker, a furious ferret, which he resembled a bit. Explaining how to measure light and its implications for Relativity and radio physics, Cliff leapt onto tables, gesticulated, raced up and down the room, tumbled, rolled, scribbled on whiteboards; words like “delicious” and “delightful” shot through his talk

The Sacramento Organization for Rational Thinking (SORT) . . .

- Is dedicated to the promotion of rational thinking in all areas of life.
- Upholds the superiority of science over the mystical.
- Promotes and supports all efforts of intelligent communication that provide a counterpoint to the strong waves of anti-rationalism, irrationalism, and mysticism sweeping the world today.

Toward these ends we . . .

- Host a monthly discussion group.
- Publish a monthly newsletter.
- Host special events, talks, and presentations.
- Host a web page.

While SORT began with and still continues to be concerned with the promotion of critical thinking in areas dealing with the pseudo-scientific, the paranormal, the mystical, and the fraudulent, we strongly promote critical thinking in *all* areas of human thought and endeavor.

The core of SORT activities is our discussion group. The art of intelligent conversation is not dead. We at SORT believe that rational conversation--the meeting of minds, the free exchange of ideas and the provocative stimulation of critical questions-- is one of the most civilized and enlightening of all human activities.

SORT discussion topics have ranged from UFOs to the Holocaust, from “alternative medicine” to the problems in communicating science to the public, from classic and recent cons and scams to the teaching of critical thinking. Our discussions are hosted by one of the SORT founders, and participants are by no means limited to experts (although they may include experts) but are made up of intelligent and questioning people concerned with the topic of the evening.

like hot pinwheel sparkles, igniting the audience. A delightful corollary, a delicious finding. Contagious enthusiasm, truly.

When Cliff isn't rabble rousing for science or nabbing speeders with a home-made radar gun, he purveys fine Klein bottles and knitted wool Klein caps. Please click to <http://www.kleinbottle.com>; purchase a bottle which has zero volume, yet holds the universe! He deserves your business. (This was an unpaid plug.)

Learning about lightspeed meant missing the panel on Heinlein 101, unfortunately. Oh well, more choices.

Next was Ellen Kushner, host of the weekly NPR radio show, *Sound and Spirit*, an hour of "music and ideas ... an exploration of the myth and music, traditions and beliefs ..." Bill Moyers called it "The best program on public radio bar none" (another unpaid plug). Ms. Kushner also writes mythic fantasy, her best-known novel being *Thomas the Rhymer*; now she hoped to sneak-preview her pending music program, "The Lord of the Rings," planned to air the week of November 9, 2002. A much needed rest after the previous panel; excerpts played on a boombox, luckily appropriated at the last minute, were soothing, evocative and entertaining. Ms. Kushner selected pieces that appealed to a wide audience, not just folks who have read Tolkien's books. Yes, parodies included.

After a gap, actually a memory gap, we vaguely recall wandering into the Feghoot Event. Who is Ferdinand Feghoot? We don't want to go there - but we will. He is a piece of science fiction mythology, larger than life, stranger than fact, and subject of countless adventures, each end-

ing in an atrocious pun. He battled alien menaces like the Dallasian, a fur-covered monster carrying a hypodermic needle on its head; humans dreaded it until Feghoot pointed out it was simply a furry with a syringe on top. SF writer Grendel Briarton created the character in 1911, but Feghoot quickly got away from him, becoming a sort of fannish icon. The running joke of Con-josé was Feghoot as the Imaginary Guest of Honor. At each major event, the MC explained Feghoot's absence with an elaborate tale leading to a line that made your teeth clench. We'll spare you the stories but not the lines. Feghoot was busy ...

- trying to rook a grift Norse in the south,
 - wilting at tin mills,
 - caught between a crock and a card place,
 - spying over milled croak,
- ... and much else. We wandered vaguely out again and through several other panels, but the facial tics continued all day.

The appearance of Patrick Stewart that evening was a bonus. The program hadn't listed this, and Worldcon is mostly a reader's convention, so media stars rarely show. Friends told us later how a studio had shoe-horned him in at the last minute, actually paying the Worldcon committee to let Stewart plug some upcoming movies (*Star Trek Nemesis* and *X-Men II*). He brought clips and trailers. Dripping Shakespearian ambience as usual, Stewart was nevertheless friendly and informal, joked with the fans, poked a bit of fun at himself, and obviously enjoyed hobnobbing.

Tired yet? Saturday brought panels on *Alien Sex* (extrapolated from exotic reproductive methods found on earth), *Time*

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About the Founding Members:

Ray Spangenburg and Kit Moser are a husband-and-wife writing team specializing in science and technology. They are co-authors of 52 books and over 100 articles, including publication in the *Skeptical Inquirer*, and they are former co-editors of the *Bay Area Skeptics Information Sheet (BASIS)*.

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Travel and Timescapes (well, what does happens if you go back and kill your grandfather?), Wildcards: Superheroes in science fiction, Sapientizing Animals (if a lion could talk ...), and 1000 Ideas in One Hour. At the latter panel, writer Orson Scott Card stood before the fans and plotted a complete novel out loud in just 60 minutes, using ideas the audience tossed to him.

That evening was the Masquerade. Settling into seats on the upper level of the Civic Auditorium, binoculars in hand, we observed the parade of costumes and skits, wending haltingly from Novice class to Junior to Master. The audience shouted suggestions to the MC, and he

bantered back as if we all sat in his living room. Imagination, craftsmanship and raw enthusiasm were evident: Giant mothlike aliens with graceful arms and diaphanous clothes; lady-swan princesses floating huge gauzy wings; retro-spacemen with blast-ers and tubular glass helmets; leather barbarians; extraterrestrial families on a picnic. Overall quality was hit-or-miss; it had moments of genius and moments of wincing, and of course, puns. (Feghoot would be proud.) But nearly all contestants received a bit of applause.

Sunday was more a blur, as quantum uncertainty seemed to kick in, smearing boundaries. The touching memorial for Poul Anderson, one of the grandmasters of the genre, melted into the Vernor Vinge Singularity Presentation, an exploration of superintelligence and the possible pending end of the human era. This led to Give It Up Already, with editors reading the worst excerpts from their slush piles (much grimacing, many moans); then a panel on Comics Into Movies, and a few minutes of Antimatter Technology; then ...

(... Tune in next month for the grand finale ... Hugo Awards and more!)

RATIONAL COMMUNITY CALENDAR

December 4: *SORT Meeting*

Topic: P.C.: Political Correctness—or Thought Control? SORT “Nov./Dec.” meeting, at 7:00 p.m., Room Sierra One, La Sierra Community Center, 5325 Engle Road, Carmichael. Everyone is welcome and all meetings are free.

Other Groups

December 8: *AOF Meeting*

Date & Time: Sunday, December 8, 2002, 12:00 noon. *Location:* Sierra 2 Community Center, Room 10, 2791 24th Street. (South of Broadway). The public is welcome. *Cost:* Free.

December 20: *Sacramento Skeptics*

Dinner meeting to be announced. For details, contact Richard Kowaleski at kowaleski@earthlink.net

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SORT

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*Educating Ourselves
and Educating Others*

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