AUGUST 2023
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BRINGING THE WORLD TO WEST VIRGINIA, AND WEST VIRGINIA TO THE WORLD

PAST AS PROLOGUE

by Kyle Warmack, Program Officer

45 years ago this month, Computer magazine published a special issue dedicated to examining the utility of computers within the humanities disciplines. Historians, archaeologists, and other humanities professionals contributed in-depth use cases for this newly accessible technology. One notable article written by a Harvard professor discusses how the power of the microchip can help with statistical analyses of medieval Italian land charters. At last, some desk work to which we can all relate.

In 1978, the extent to which computers—let alone smartphones or “artiﬁcial intelligence”—would inﬁltrate daily life was barely a twinkle in anyone’s eye. Science ﬁction author H. Beam Piper’s novel The Cosmic Computer was published in 1963, and its plot revolves around a devastated planet’s search for a military mega-computer named Merlin. They view it as a technomessiah. I can’t decide if in 2023, having read the book several times through the years, Piper’s take on humanity and technology is dated or prophetic.

What is perhaps most striking about Computer’s August 1978 special issue is who’s doing the talking. This was—and still is—the ofﬁcial publication of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) Computer Society. And these erudite technologists want their readership to know what thinkers and teachers in history, archaeology, musicology, etc., want to use computers for.

This emphasis on beneﬁts to the intended users feels like the reverse of our current socio-technological moment with AI. It feels as though the folks behind this new Merlin never asked for the opinions of, well, any of us.

Since the beginning of this year, one would have had to crawl under a rock to miss the parade of pronouncements, op-eds, think pieces, and what I’d call a “tech humanist,” who has spent my job is to imagine alternatives. “Lucky at York, “is the opposite of science ﬁction. As a science ﬁction writer, my job is to imagine alternatives.” Lucky for us, Doctorow is also a prolific nonﬁction author and what I’d call a “tech humanist,” who has spent two decades dissecting the impact of all this new tech and breaking it down for us as communities and individuals. “At its best, science ﬁction demands that we look beyond what a gadget does and interrogate who it is for and who does it to us. That’s an important exercise, maybe the important exercise.”

Sounds right to me.

At the Humanities Council, we’ll be doing a lot of thinking and sharing in the coming months about the part we—ordinary folks, that is—all play in choosing how this new technological landscape affects us. Don’t touch that dial, as the saying goes.

Our last issue of TRS featured a proﬁle of Fairmont, WV-born science ﬁction writer Doris Piserchia, contributed by Jay Cole (WWU). As we were preparing that issue, Cole advised us that in addition to her science ﬁction, Piserchia also published two straightforward horror novels under the pseudonym “Cart selly.” Never say we aren’t dutiful students. We hied ourselves to our preferred online secondhand book haunts, and went in search of some particularly obscure writing by an already overlooked author.

Blood County (1981), Piserchia’s ﬁrst horror novel, appeared eight years after her SB deit Mr. Justice. A brief, unashamedly gory vampire tale, Blood County echoes Stephen King’s Salem’s Lot in its depiction of a small community beset by creatures of the night. But the residents of Piserchia’s ﬁctional mountain town have struck a devil’s deal with the local vampire overlord, Duqueu, who agrees to spare them from his own terrible fate so long as they and their descendants supply him with enough freely given blood to allow him to survive. Blood County’s primary plot follows Duqueu’s sons, half-brothers Clint and Jared, who are set at odds when the latter becomes a vampire himself, but proves to lack his father’s restraint. Clint, exiled from Blood years ago, returns home to try to stop Jared from rampaging through the town. Even for a potboiler paperback, clearly, Blood County has a lot on its plate. (We haven’t even discussed the subplot concerning Clint’s reunion with his childhood sweetheart, or the journalist who stumbles into town and ends up fighting beside Clint against his undead half-brother and Duqueu himself.)

But from below the novel’s intricate action, some interesting regional elements bubble to the surface. There’s the old story of brother-against-brother, so familiar to readers steeped in West Virginia lore and history.

But there’s also a rather caustic critique of the insularity of Blood County’s fictional mountain town. Clint and Jared are inhabitants of Blood County, but they’ve never been to the coast. They’ve never seen the ocean. They’re mountain folk, and they’re proud of their mountain heritage. They don’t want to be contaminated by outside influences. They don’t want to be assimilated into the mainstream. They want to maintain their mountain culture and way of life.

In the end, Blood County is a story about the clash of cultures. It’s a story about the struggle between tradition and modernity. It’s a story about the clash between the old and the new. And it’s a story about the struggle between good and evil.

As I said earlier, Blood County is a story about the clash of cultures. It’s a story about the struggle between tradition and modernity. It’s a story about the clash between the old and the new. And it’s a story about the struggle between good and evil.

The August 1978 cover of Computer magazine published a special issue focused on how the growing accessibility of computers could be useful in humanities disciplines. Image courtesy of iee.org.
Aviator Howard Clifton "Tick" Lilly was born in Crew, Raleigh County, on August 27, 1916, to Ova Ashton and Amanda Bragg Lilly. As a boy, he could transform bits and pieces of junk cars into hot rods and motorcycles, which he would race in Sunday afternoon "junkyard derbies." In a 2014 article on Lilly for Goldsensel magazine, writer Jack Clark described going to one of these derbies as a boy. The track, cut into a vacant cow pasture, had "no level straightaways, no barricades, no fences, just a wide-open track running over hill and dale and even, at one point, through a small creek." These boisterous events sometimes involved carousing, fistfights, and the occasional wheel flying off in mid-race. Attracting big crowds to these races meant higher payouts to the winners.

Lilly won these races frequently because he often had the only car capable of finishing. He once had to make a nail-biting escape from other racers' wives who were pelling him with rocks after he won a contest. Another time, he pranked the crowd by crossing the finish line (in first, of course) and, keeping the accelerator floored, drove the car over a hill. When worried spectators chased after him, they found Lilly sitting behind the driver's wheel and laughing. He told the concerned onlookers the race had been so boring he wanted to give them a little excitement.

Lilly's experience as a daredevil prepared him for his more traditional professional aviation career. After working briefly for Beckley Newspapers and the Charleston Gazette, Lilly taught mechanics at a Civilian Conservation Corps camp. In July 1941, he joined the U.S. Naval Air Corps and went on active duty after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December of that year. His assignment in World War II was to fly seaplanes, which bored him. He obtained an honorable discharge in September 1942 and became a test pilot for the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (NACA), a precursor of NASA, at Langley Memorial Aeronautical Laboratory in Virginia. The next year, he was transferred to the Lewis Flight Propulsion Laboratory in Cleveland (later the Glenn Research Center) and then, in 1947, became the first engineering pilot assigned to the Muroc Flight Test Unit in California. Along with Chuck Yeager and others, Lilly became a pioneer of supersonic flight at Muroc, test-piloting the Douglas D-558-1 transonic research aircraft and the Bell X-1.

On March 21, 1948, Lilly became the fourth person to break the speed of sound; five months earlier, Yeager had become the first to do so (soon followed by James Thomas Fitzgerald Jr. and Herb Hoover). Six weeks after Lilly's historic flight, on May 3, 1948, he was taking off from Muroc in his D-558-1 Skystreak. His plane crashed when the engine compressor failed and severed the control cables. Lilly became the first of many NACA/NASA test pilots to die in the line of duty.

Lilly is buried in Arlington National Cemetery. A street at Edwards Air Force Base (which includes many NACA/NASA test pilots to die in the line of duty). Though it couldn't be said to be anything like a lost classic of the genre, Blood County plays enough variations on vampire stories to hold a reader's interest, and the novelty of such a tale being set adjacent to Grafton and Morgantown may be enough to lure horror aficionados to add it to their shelves. Copies are available through used-book web sites.

Howard Lilly in his flight gear. NASA

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**SPEAKING OF TECHNOLOGY...**

Scan the QR code at right to read a short NASA article about Howard Lilly in the 1945 Cleveland National Air Races. Or visit https://go.nasa.gov/2kim499

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**EVENTS AUGUST - SEPTEMBER 2023**

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<td>Sept 5</td>
<td>Stonewall Jackson, Mark Twain - History Alivel, Cass Scenic Railroad State Park.</td>
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<td>Sept 6</td>
<td>Stonewall Jackson, History Alivel, West Virginia Schools for the Deaf &amp; Blind.</td>
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<td>Sept 7</td>
<td>Mother Jones - History Alivel, North Berkeley Public Library.</td>
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<td>Sept 9</td>
<td>WV Folklore Apprenticeship Showcase - Fiber arts, soul food cooking, and mushroom foraging.</td>
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<td>Sept 9</td>
<td>Nellie By - History Alivel, Calhoun County Public Library.</td>
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<td>Sept 12</td>
<td>The Nation That Never Was: Reconstructing America's Story by Amicus Curiae lecture by Kermit Roosevelt III, Marshall University.</td>
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<td>Sept 16</td>
<td>Nellie By - History Alivel, Great Bend Museum, Ravenswood.</td>
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<td>Sept 22</td>
<td>Appalachian Heritage Weekend in Residences - Am Pancake, multiple events, Shepherd University and area.</td>
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<td>Sept 23</td>
<td>Bob Diener - History Alivel, McCoy's Grand Theater, Moorefield.</td>
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<td>Sept 29</td>
<td>Pearl Buck - History Alivel, Lost Creek Community Building, Lost Creek.</td>
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**THIRSTY WORK**

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