The August 1978 cover of Computer magazine, which focused on how the growing accessibility of computers could be useful in humanities disciplines. Image courtesy of ieee.org

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 as a techno-messiah. 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 other intellectual scrums related to AI-powered language models such as ChatGPT. According to the newsfeed, these so-called "chatbots" are going to kill the college essay, put humanities-based higher education on the chopping block, and/or devastate whole swaths of various white-collar industries.

At the other end of the spectrum, it's tempting to wave away this latest development as another surge of the Silicon Valley hype-cycle. Given the laundry list of vaporware tech moguls have promised in recent decades—here's looking at you, metaverse, hyperloop, and self-driving cars—AI might easily be relegated to the same class of intellectual curiosity as Amazon delivery drones: something that, even if it comes to pass, may never reach West Virginia at all. Or arrive ten years after becoming commonplace everywhere else.

That's not the case this time, though. AI doesn't need new hardware to get into your house, because our current devices are connected

all the time. AI is already suggesting ways to finish sentences in your emails. Your tenth grader can already ask Google Bard (that company's equivalent of ChatGPT) to compose their latest assignment—say, a 500-word essay for their U.S. History class. Astoundingly, it will probably get half the facts wrong, but that's a topic for a future article.

Despite all that's currently lousy about it, AI is here to stay. When something is backed by the financial muscle of the world's biggest companies, it's not easy to force the genie back into the bottle. That's precisely the problem, in a nutshell, because your kid's history teacher now has *no choice* but to deal with students trying to pass off AI-composed papers as their own. Even a fourth grader with internet access can now access bard.google.com to spit out a cozy and cliché book report of appropriate length.

Proponents of AI argue it will improve with time. That someday it *won't* make up fake court cases when lawyers use it to speed up writing legal briefs (look it up). We're asked, as individuals and as a society, to take on faith that this technology will be useful and good for us someday if we all keep feeding it our data. It feels disheartening at best—and disempowering at worst.

Which brings me back to Merlin.

I'm not spoiling much about Piper's excellent novel when I say the mega-computer doesn't swoop in at the end to solve everyone's problems. But neither is the book a cautionary tale of unavoidable cyber-doom. Part of what I enjoy about the yarn is its strong current of *humanity*-driven hope. *The Cosmic Computer* is ultimately a story about self-determination and resilience. Finding purpose in the face of what seems like a hopeless situation.

These hopeful tomorrows are something I think science fiction and the humanities share. Both fields focus on myriad possibilities. They show us how limited our perception of the present is. That we have been before, and will be in the future, something different than we are now.

This year's McCreight speaker, author Cory Doctorow, would agree with me. I know because he said so in a recent speech at York University, where the Canadian Science Fiction Hall of Famer received an Honourary Doctor of Laws. We also spoke to him in anticipation of hosting him here at the Univeristy of Charleston on October 19, just before the West Virginia Book Festival.
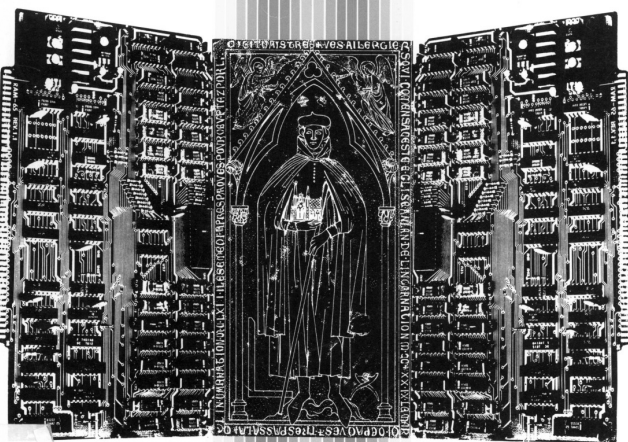
"The belief that nothing can change," Doctorow said at York, "is the opposite of science fiction. As a science fiction writer, my job is to imagine alternatives." Lucky for us, Doctorow is also a prolific nonfiction author and what I'd call a "tech humanist," who has spent two decades dissecting the 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 does it *for* and who it does it *to*. That's an important exercise, maybe *the* important exercise."

Sounds about 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.

Author Cory Doctorow will deliver the 2023 McCreight Lecture in the Humanities in Charleston on October 19. His talk will discuss technological self-determination in the 21st century.

THIRSTY WORK

DOUBLING DOWN ON DORIS PISERCHIA

by Eric Waggoner,
Executive Director

Our last issue of *TBS* featured a profile of Fairmont, WV-born science fiction writer Doris Piserchia, contributed by Jay Cole (WVU). 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 "Curt Selby." 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 SF debut *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, Duquieu, 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 Duquieu'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 self-restraint. Clint, exiled from Blood years ago, returns home to try to stop Jared from rampaging through the region and devouring his way through the townsfolk.

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 Duquieu himself). But from below the novel's frenetic 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

STREAK IN THE SKY
AVIATOR "TICK" LILLY

by Stan Bumgardner for the West Virginia Encyclopedia

Aviator Howard Clifton "Tick" Lilly was born in Crow, 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 *Goldenseal* 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 pelting 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 NASA Armstrong, the former Muroc) in California is named Lilly Avenue in his honor. On October 19, 2009, a monument was dedicated to him at Raleigh County Memorial Airport.
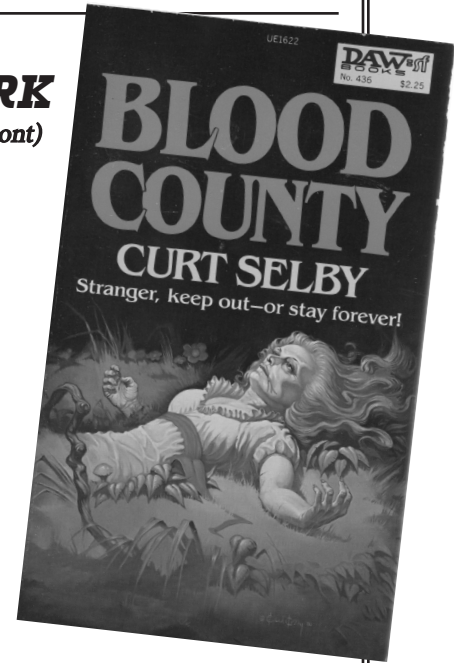
> **Speaking of technology...**
> Scan the QR code at right to read a short NASA article about Howard Lilly in the 1945 Cleveland National Air Races. Or visit https://qrco.de/beAmz9
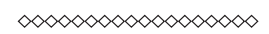
Howard Lilly in his flight gear.
NASA

THIRSTY WORK
(continued from front)

BLOOD COUNTY
CURT SELBY
Stranger, keep out—or stay forever!

residents, who have gradually transformed fear of their dark overlord into fear of any outsider who might break the fragile balance they've struck between serfdom and slaughter. And in the book's infrequent quiet moments, conversations among several characters center on the costs of leaving home versus the costs of staying—a fraught discussion whose nuances will be instantly recognizable to readers who've had to weigh that choice themselves, albeit in more realistic settings.

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.

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EVENTS AUGUST - SEPTEMBER 2023

Aug 5 Stonewall Jackson, Mark Twain - *History Alive!*, Cass Scenic Railroad State Park. 9:30am and 12:30pm, respectively

Aug 5 Abigail Adams - *History Alive!*, West Virginia Schools for the Deaf & Blind, Romney. 1pm

Aug 6 Stonewall Jackson - *History Alive!*, West Virginia Schools for the Deaf & Blind, Romney. 3pm

Aug 17 Mother Jones - *History Alive!*, North Berkeley Public Library, Falling Waters. 5:30pm

Sept 9 WV Folklife Apprenticeship Showcase - Fiber arts, soul food cooking, and mushroom foraging, Phil Gainer Community Center, Elkins. 3pm

Sept 9 Nellie Bly - *History Alive!*, Calhoun County Public Library, Grantsville. 2pm

Sept 10 Ruby Bradley - *History Alive!*, John Marshall High School, Glen Dale. 11am

Sept 12 The Nation That Never Was: Reconstructing America's Story - *Amicus Curiae* lecture by Kermit Roosevelt III, Marshall University. 7pm

Sept 16 Nellie Bly - *History Alive!*, Great Bend Museum, Ravenswood. 2pm

Sept 22- Sept 29 Appalachian Heritage Writer in Residence- Ann Pancake, multiple events, Shepherd University and area

Sept 23 Walt Disney - *History Alive!*, McCoy's Grand Theater, Moorefield. 1pm

Sept 23 Pearl Buck - *History Alive!*, Lost Creek Community Building, Lost Creek. 2pm

Sept 23 Mark Twain - *History Alive!*, Capon Bridge Fire Company Grounds, Capon Bridge. 1:30pm

Sept 25 Ruby Bradley - *History Alive!*, Vienna Public Library, Vienna. 6pm

Sept 30 WV Folklife Apprenticeship Showcase - Clawhammer banjo, old-time fiddle tunes, fiddle repair, Gabor Folklife Center, Fairmont State University. 4pm

The Council advises contacting the venue if you have questions about an event, as dates or details may change without the Council's prior knowledge.

WEST VIRGINIA HUMANITIES COUNCIL