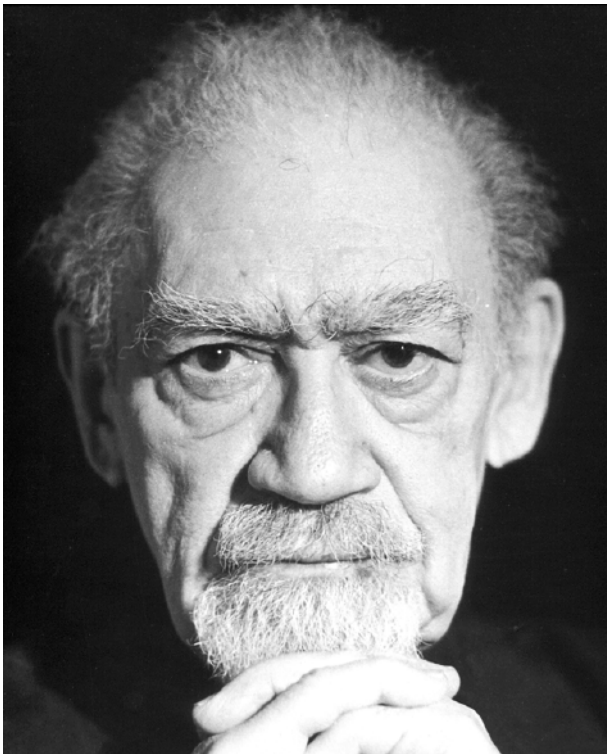


SIGMA

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Philip Klass aka William Tenn 1920 – 2010

Presidential Musings: Philip Klass Eric Davin



Over the years, Parsec member David Brody has filmed numerous hours of noted science fiction writer “William Tenn,” perhaps better known to Parsecians as fellow club member Philip Klass, talking about his life. This was for a documentary David is preparing on Phil, who died February 7, 2010, at age 89. As we all know, Phil loved to talk and gained a local reputation as a raconteur. No doubt David recorded many of Phil’s myriad stories. David’s appreciation of Phil’s life and work will appear elsewhere in this issue, but I would like to recount just one story I heard from Phil Klass.

At Confluence 18 in 2006 I was on a panel with Phil Klass. The panel was supposed to discuss some pseudo profundity by near-blind Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges. I can no longer remember any specifics about the Borges hoo-haw. It had been suggested as a panel topic by Phil, who was enamored of Borges because Borges came to lecture at Penn State while Klass taught writing there. Phil was asked to speak first, to explain why he chose the Borges Deep Thought as a panel topic. Once the spotlight is turned on most writers and college professors, they linger in it (I know, as I’m both). Phil was no exception, even though retired from both writing and teaching. Once launched upon his topic, Phil proceeded to lecture on Borges for most of the hour reserved for the panel. As with the panel topic itself, I can no longer remember what Phil said about the ostensible Borges profundity.

However, I do remember the story Phil told about Borges: The near-blind Borges made a dramatic entrance into the packed Penn State lecture hall where he was to speak. He entered from the rear and proceeded down the center aisle toward the front. All eyes turned toward him. His hand was on the shoulder of a cute co-ed, who led him slowly and carefully to the front, cautioning him about this wire here and that piece of paper there on the floor. This took some time, and all the while Borges, his head up, peered intently this

way and that into infinity, his blind eyes seeing more than mere mortals can see with their paltry 20-20 vision.

Then, seated at the table in front, Borges began to speak. Someone in the back of the room stood up with a camera to snap a shot. Borges saw him and fell into a picturesque pose for the camera. And every subsequent time a camera was aimed at him, Borges again fell into a similar picturesque pose.

“It was clear that his blindness was a fake,” Phil said. “Borges wasn’t blind at all. It was just a good show.”

At this month’s Parsec meeting, it is again time for us to brainstorm about possible panels for this year’s Confluence. Unfortunately, none of those panels will feature Phil as a member. We will miss his stories. Σ

February 2010 Meeting Minutes

Bill Hall

Before the meeting we all signed a valentine to Ann, who was just getting back out of the hospital. This time, Lawrence Connolly brought his wife Ginny. Eric told us about how he became inspector of elections of his district by his own one vote. The raffle table now features a Watchmen poster, and Greg won again, but we let Ginny pick out Terry Pratchett’s *Making Money*.

After Judy showed us a glass painting called “Covet,” with gumball machine trinkets representing love, a car, and other desires, Connolly shared with us the weird music which Fantasist Enterprises (word has it that www.febooks.net is where they can be found) came up with to go with the CD of his book *Veins* (with some input from his family). We also saw imagery, care of tattoo artist Nathaniel Sawyer, for his *Visions* anthology of 22 stories. Connolly can’t ever seem to get away from his story “Echoes” (irony, perhaps); people wondered of *Visions* “Why doesn’t this have ‘Echoes’?”, so in *Echoes* went once more. He read “Step on a

Crack,” which I think of as a *Twilight Zone* for adults story, even if it features a little boy. (Connolly’s style of reading and use of music and imagery felt a bit beatnik to me.) He also read from “This Way to Egress” with music called “Riding the Spirit Wind.”

Joe Newcomer showed us his highly idiosyncratic and consistently witty electronic cartoons prominently featuring a Little Grey Cat and his take on home life. In one cartoon the character of Flounder (I guess standing in for Joe) “replenishes the ouzo layer” of our atmosphere. Perhaps best were certain crises, as an imprisoned Grey Cat receiving a cake with a (computer) file baked into it (not very useful against those bars, you see), and the terrible devastation from mixing pasta with antipasta.

Our editor Henry showed us data-heavy wisps of fractal smoke. The smoke was convincing, although Henry pointed out how in some small areas it seemed to wind directly around invisible spheres. Kira explained her PARSEC membership card art from 1999 to today, of which my personal favorite may be the 2007 one using the Cassini shot of Saturn, with last year’s a close second.

David Brody got to show us footage from his documentary project concerning the dearly departed Phil Klass aka William Tenn. David worried that it was too “talking head,” but as Kira pointed out, “Phil was the ultimate talking head.” It featured comments from writers like Harry Harrison, or Gordon Van Gelder saying “A hundred years ago, Phil would have been a rabbi.” It touched on his upbringing, his war experience, and his dealing with the fact that the horror of Hiroshima was going to allow him to finally come home. When he picked up a magazine and read the words “stepped out on the soil of another world,” Phil was hooked for life. We know the feeling.

A personal note: I never realized it, but Connolly was there with me in a long-gone shop called the Bookworm in 1978 when I got Joe Haldeman to autograph a paperback copy of *Mindbridge* for me. Haldeman encouraged Connolly, saying magazines are always “hungry,” and that led to Connolly writing something called “Cockroaches.” Haldeman sounded dubious about a space station idea of mine, but then he seemed to accept it – and years later came his *Worlds* books. HmMMMM. Σ

Annals of Anime. IX. My-HIME.

Barton Paul Levenson

In modern or near-future Japan, one bridge links Fuka Academy to the mainland. Twelve girls and women in or near the academy are secretly HIME. The Japanese word means "princess," or "important lady" more generally, but here it's an awkward acronym for HIGHly-advanced Materializing Equipment. *My-HIME* is really a "magical girl" anime with the magic thinly disguised as advanced technology. HIME can summon up equipment, including huge mechas, just by the power of their will. A HIME's personal mecha is called her "child."

On the island, the secret "HIME Festival" is an ongoing cycle. A bunch of HIME turn up every 300 years and fight until the last one standing marries the obsidian prince and rules at his side. Except that the obsidian prince is a bad guy and the girls are good guys. Or most of them are. Except when they're not. It gets complicated.

The protagonist is sixteen-year-old redhead Tokiha Mai. Mai is serious, thoughtful, and responsible, but reluctant to embrace her powers. A love triangle exists between her, red-headed Tate Yuuichi, and dark-haired senior Kanzaki Reito, who later turns out to be the obsidian prince. In addition, Yuuichi is pursued by his childhood friend, middle-schooler Munakata Shiho, who calls Yuuichi her brother but wants him as a lover ("I'm such a perv!"). Mai is strongly tempted to separate herself from anyone she might love, as friends and lovers of HIME are frequent targets. She is also tempted to embrace the 300-year-old HIME cycle and defeat all the others. The question is whether her loving nature and sensible outlook will win in the end.

Mai's best friend is thirteen-year-old, dark-haired Minagi Miko-to. This younger kid is strange with a capital S. She carries a huge sword, and is an extremely effective, competent fighter. But at social life she is painfully naive and childlike. She loves Mai to distraction and, when separated from her too long, will often leap onto her and nuzzle between her breasts, even in public, much to

Mai's embarrassment. There's nothing sexual to it in Mikoto's mind. Despite her age, Mikoto appears to know nothing--absolutely nothing--about love, romance, dating, or sex:

SCENE

(An indoor school courtyard where, for an annual festival, students leave a note for one person they want to date.)

FEMALE CLASSMATE

Mikoto, why are you putting up so many of those?

MIKOTO

I'm writing one for each of my friends!
I have one for you, too!

(Classmate and companion look at each other.)

Mikoto is a manic glutton who never gains weight. She especially loves Mai's cooking, and can be led into traps simply by placing a line of food in her path. Tragically, she gets turned by the bad guys, and an important subplot is whether Mai's love for her can recover Mikoto in the end.

Kuga Natsuki, 17, is a blue-haired, grimly serious, often truant girl who rides a motorcycle, dresses in a military-looking uniform perhaps of her own design when not on campus, and packs heat. She is out to destroy an organization called District 1 which caused her mother's death. Natsuki goes through hell in this series, from being captured more than once by her sadistic rival Yuuki Nao, to being raped when asleep by her alleged friend, blonde class president Fujino Shizuro, whom she later reconciles with. (I hate the trope of rape victims falling in love with their rapists, or even tolerating them. I hated it in Heinlein's *Friday* and S.L. Viehl's *Stardoc* and I hate it here.) Natsuki is competent, self-assured, and skilled, and it's a good thing she works for the good guys.

There are endless complications, both in the semipolitical adventure plot and of the soap opera variety. The Japanese government is manipulated into sending mercenaries from the Searrs [sic] corpo-

ration to take over the school. Searrs has bioengineered their own HIME, eight year old sociopath Alyssa. She leads the troops who occupy the school and tries to coercively turn the HIME. When she fails, Searrs has her assassinated. The only person Alyssa loves is her robot guardian, Miyu (another half-assed acronym--Multiple Intelligencial [sic] Yggdrasil Unit). Miyu commits suicide on Alyssa's death but is fixed and revived later.

Each HIME's "child" mecha has a distinctive bizarre shape. Mai's is a dragon. Alyssa's is a death-ray satellite in low Earth orbit. The HIME spend the early episodes fighting "orphans," who are out-of-control "childs" (children?) rejected by present and earlier HIMEs.

There is humor in the series, but more sheer grimness. But it's worth watching for the interactions of the major characters, all of whom have distinct personalities easy to tell apart. In addition, the animation and background art are very good indeed. Σ

Announcements

Phil Klass

So often in this section there is joy in telling everyone about one of our members getting published, or of some event of interest. But that can not always be the case. With the saddest regret, it is my duty to announce the passing of Phil Klass on February 7, 2010.

Dr. Luukkala on YouTube

Our speaker (Dr. Barry Luukkala) from January has some of his talk material available on YouTube as "Science & Science Fiction Course" (www.youtube.com/watch?v=kO9qF9w8WVo).

Dinner and a Murder

Ligonier Valley Writers present the interactive murder mystery Murder by Trowel and Error. Friday and Saturday, April 16 and 17, in Greensburg. Doors open at 6:00 p.m. Tickets are \$30. Deadline for reservations is April 9. More information at LVWonline.org.

Rememberances of Phill

A Klass Not by Himself

I own a copy of “The Wooden Star” and still get an occasional wry chuckle out of it. We all know that Pittsburgh was honored to be home to one of spec fic’s great satirists, but I even think of William Tenn as a kind of counterweight to Ray Bradbury and an alternative to Rod Serling. While Bradbury would express a heart-ache forthrightly, Tenn poked gamely at what caused such heart-ache, and while even Serling himself seemed shocked and appalled by his very own final twists of irony, Tenn seemed at home in irony, thriving on its outrage and its outrageousness. Tenn may have been a little too grownup a little too early to become especially popular, so he bears rediscovering and our pointing him out to new generations. My personal favorite jester in the court of spec fic is Jorge Luis Borges, but even Borges could get too dry for his own good. Tenn was reliably wry but never dry.

William Tenn was, of course, Phil Klass, and while at this time it’s understandable to concentrate on his work or his personality, both of which are voluminous, I’d like to dissent a little and concentrate on Phil Klass as simply an eyewitness, a window on the bygone Twentieth Century. At the February 2010 meeting we got to see some of David Brody’s video of Phil, which concentrated on the formative firsthand experience of World War II, but I personally remember even more than what we glimpsed there. I remember Phil surveying all the bodies left behind by the Nazis and wondering how much had been lost to the world, how many luminaries or their ancestors were among the dead, how many Einsteins or Spinozas. What ordinary men might take whole lifetimes, if even that, to face up to, Phil seemed aware of almost immediately. I like to imagine him as a journalist, although one can see how easily his lively imagination could have lured him away from that.

In particular, I think of him as a window on John W. Campbell and the Golden Age. Listening to Phil, Campbell came across to me a rather Orson-Wellesian figure, brilliant and blustery. I recall

Campbell asking where exactly in the human brain self-consciousness resided, and Phil spluttering (like any sensible person) to try to reply. I especially recall when Campbell, pursuant to a deep conversation with Phil about the Nazi horror that Phil witnessed, essentially asked people “Would someone please tell Phil that I said that I believe the Jew is Homo SU-perior? That’s SU-perior.” I can also recall Phil describing Heinlein bristling at a discussion of My Lai, and of course how Theodore Sturgeon, long before he was helping to keep Harlan Ellison glued together, also lent some gentle guidance to Phil as well. Sturgeon just seemed to be like that.

These are the things I worry about the most right now, this business of pinning down these true stories, these fascinating impressions, these old insights which seem as fresh as any formed today. It is typical to eulogize a man and his work in isolation, so I say, let us also remember his interactions – with Fruma, of course, but also his faith, his country, his planet, the estate of speculative fiction, and so many of spec fic’s greatest authors and contributors. The man was a unique and valuable window on our Twentieth Century. We should keep that window open.

— Bill Hall

Phil Klass: A Life Well Lived

Phil Klass. We will miss you. As our dear friend, you were also our teacher and mentor and we came to know you so well.

We know about your short stories; those wonderful stories. Improbable, weird, funny, and oddly tragic. Their wisdom is as fresh as ever and they will never be matched.

We know about the twinkle in your eyes, that mischievous laughter, your kindness and love of life.

We know about Phil the bard, regaling us with tales of your life, the things you’ve seen and done; the depression, the war, Greenwich village, Fruma and Penn State.

What a life it was. A writer’s life.

As a small child, Phil and his mother moved to New York City to be with his father, a man whose commitment to peace had led to

his desertion from the British army during WWI. Phil grew up in various parts of Brooklyn, sometimes among fellow Jews, sometimes not. Through alternating periods of poverty and relative comfort he learned to love reading. He read everything he could get his hands on, often having to hide books from his mother, often pilfering change to buy used paperbacks.

Then Phil discovered something called science fiction, a form of literature relegated to cheaply made pulps that were, perhaps, more affordable for a young boy, desperate to get his hands on any way of feeding his hunger for words. With his ability to see past conventional wisdom, he saw SF as a literature of ideas, a playground for the unfettered imagination. As a writer, it would become the natural choice of a mind filled with observations of the strange and ironic.

Then came WWII, a conflagration that itself must have seemed unimaginable. It was as a soldier that Phil honed his sense of the absurd. The army, with its lumbering bureaucracy, and Kafkaesque juxtaposition of the banal and horrifying, proved to be fertile ground for an insightful and sensitive young man with a literary bent.

Upon his return from Europe, Phil worked various jobs, selling his first story while at sea in the merchant marines. Back in New York he fell under the influence of such giants of SF as John W. Campbell, Horace Gold, and Theodore Sturgeon. In the guise of William Tenn, he developed a unique satirical style in a field in which many writers took themselves far too seriously. As is the case with most satirists, beneath the laughter was the sadness of someone who had seen and experienced so much human ugliness.

Then he met Fruma. Her intellect was easily a match for Phil's and she brought into his life a practicality and drive that most men are never fortunate enough to find in the women they marry. Herself an editor and writer, Fruma helped guide him into the next phase of his life.

As a professor at Penn State, Phil started with a one year contract that turned into twenty three years. He went on to tenure without having a college degree of his own and helped create new generations of young writers with his wisdom, charm, and intolerance for mediocrity.

In retirement he came to Pittsburgh and became *our* teacher, our muse and above all, our friend.

This then, the rough sketch of an American life and a reminder of the possibilities of a life well lived. For so many of our parents and grandparents, the steel towers, mountains and fertile plains of this country were places to seek hope in factories, shops and farms. For Phil it was a place to pursue the works of the mind. He was in some respects a paradigm for so many who came here and took up the pen or the paintbrush, choosing creativity as their contribution to the patchwork quilt of America.

As many of you know I collect recordings of old time radio. Much of the time I listen to those great old shows as a way of passing the time with a minimum of effort; while washing dishes or driving. It's not meant to take much focus. My favorite shows are the SF series of the fifties and that's where I first heard the name William Tenn. If the announcer said that an episode of *X Minus One* or *Dimension X* was based on a story by William Tenn, I'd brace myself. Suddenly my full attention was required. I knew I'd laugh, but I also knew that a lesson had begun.

Then I read Tenn's stories and learned even more. Finally I met the man behind the pseudonym and my real education began.

As I work through the many hours of interviews with Phil that I am fortunate enough to have on tape, I expect to keep learning. He remains my teacher, my inspiration and my friend.

— David Brody

[Editors note: this "Remembrances of Phill" section will continue from issue to issue for as long as comments are contributed. So please feel free to send us your fond notions of this great writer and his family that we have all been fortunate to have known.]

Book Review: The Hunger Games

by Suzanne Collins

Elizabeth Irvine

The *Hunger Games* is about a girl named Katniss who lived in a place that was once called North America. In its place was a capitol city called Capitol surrounded by 13 districts.

Due to a rebellion the 13th district was wiped out. As punishment to the other districts, every year, in each district, two children's names were drawn out of a bowl to compete in a fight to the death in an arena that could be any type of environment. Before the games, the kids from each district were presented to the crowd. Then the kids have to go into training for three days. If they choose to, viewers may send any kid something that they may need in the arena. There is a thing in the center of the arena called the Cornucopia. Inside are supplies and weapons. The kids have to kill each other with any method they choose. The last kid, or tribute, standing is the winner. Everything is broadcast on television.

In the book, Katniss' sister is chosen. Katniss takes her place. Then at the interviews the boy tribute from Katniss' District, whose name is Peeta, says that he is in love with her. At first she isn't sure she loves him, but then she starts to love him back. At the end of the games, everyone *except* for the president sees what happens as an act of love. He thinks she is trying to start a rebellion, and he doesn't like it. This could mean trouble.

There is a chance this book will be made into a movie. I'd like to see it made into a movie. It would be interesting to see what those broadcasts looked like. It would be cool if the movie showed the tributes' families, then what's on the screen in the movie, then what's going on in the arena. I would also like to see what the arena looked like. I would like to see what the different districts look like. You would be able to see the state the districts are in. You would get more of the effects of the battles. The movie would be very good in 3D. The audience would feel like they are in the battles.

It's the perfect story of rebellion because Katniss does some acts of rebellion against the Capitol like Honoring a Friend in the Arena. It is also a love story, but you may not see which way it's

going. For example, I thought Katniss was just pretending to love Peeta, but my dad thought that Katniss actually loved him. Romance like that usually attracts lots of attention.

The *Hunger Games* is one of my favorite books. This book would be a big hit as a movie. This book would make a good movie because it is very exciting. It is just the sort of story people like. It is set in the future. Σ

Book Review: The Hunger Games and Catching Fire by Suzanne Collins

Alan Irvine

A couple of years ago, I was on a panel at Confluence about what Young Adult fiction the rest of us should be reading. (At least, that's what the panel was supposed to be about; unfortunately it quickly morphed into a discussion of "who is a Real Young Adult author and who are the evil, vile pretenders who should not be allowed into the YA sandbox?") If the *Hunger Games* books had been around then, they would have been top of my list of recommendations.

My daughter Elizabeth picked up *The Hunger Games* at a school book fair in December. On a Monday. By Wednesday, she had finished the book. On Thursday, she dug out the last of her birthday money and was heading back to the book fair to buy the second book. She was so enthusiastic about these books that I decided to take a look. I was immediately hooked.

The Hunger Games takes place in the country of Panem, which is divided into a Capitol and 13 districts, each one of which produces some sort of raw material or finished good for the capitol. Years ago the districts rebelled against the Capitol's rule. The rebellion was ruthlessly put down; District 13 destroyed. In punishment, and as a reminder of Capitol's power, every year the districts must select two Tributes, a boy and a girl between ages 12 and 18, to compete in the *Hunger Games* – a battle to the death in a constructed environment filled with genetically engineered dangers and nasty traps, all of which is broadcast across Panem. The games are a cross between

Roman gladiator games and reality TV (both of which Collins has said were inspirations for the book.) It is *Survivor* taken to its logical extreme.

The first book focuses on the games themselves – from the initial lottery, through all the hoopla (an opening ceremony worthy of the grandest Olympic games, unveiling of the competitors' costumes and make-up right out of Oscar night, TV interviews, etc.) and through the brutality of the games themselves. Collins does an excellent job of bringing the reader right into the world of the games – and of setting up the parallels to our own love of reality shows, soap operas, and celebrity stories. Her characters are compelling – particularly her heroine, Katniss Everdeen. There is action, intrigue, romance (including a romantic triangle, which, by the middle of the second book, you know cannot possibly end well no matter how it comes out.

Collins originally planned to write just a single book about the games, but at the end of the book, Katniss makes some decisions that Collins realized would have major repercussions, and so Collins decided one book needed to become a trilogy. *Catching Fire* starts to explore the dangerous, even explosive repercussions of what Katniss did in the games, catching her up in brutal power politics, and plunging her back into – well, that would be spoiling things. Suffice to say, the book starts by showing that there was no happy ending to the first story, plunges us into all sorts of complications, and ends on a major cliff-hanger.

These are the sort of books I hate to get started on – compelling, fast paced enough that I pick it up thinking I'll just read a page or two before starting to cook dinner; that I can maybe squeeze in a chapter before bedtime, and suddenly an hour has flown by. The story, particularly in the first book, is also intense enough that it lingers in the mind long after you have set the book down.

The final book in the trilogy, *Mockingjay*, comes out August 24, and the publisher is already planning a Harry Potteresque roll out (complete secrecy, no advance copies, no early sales.) We already have the date marked on the calendar, though I'm not sure which of us will get to read the book first. (Ok, I'm a nice enough

Dad, I'll let Elizabeth read it first – right up to her bedtime, when it becomes mine for the rest of the evening!) Σ

No Wonder It's Less Traveled: The Road

Bill Hall

The Road is a movie I've been waiting for without even being aware of it. I'm enough of a *Shaun of the Dead* fan, but I've usually tended to skip out on stuff like *Zombieland* while never being exactly sure why. It turns out *The Road* is my answer. It's post-apocalyptic, but forget everything you've been given in that genre, forget the *Mad Max* adventures, all the silly yet still effective horror premises, all the chest-thumping *Omega Man* proclamations of defiantly triumphant machismo. In *The Road*, the world just plain ends, and it's not even that clear why. There's talk of a night of bright lights, but the crisis seems more biological, with crops failing and trees falling. A nameless man and boy wander through some of the Mt. St. Helens area, as well as sylvan patches around Oregon and Louisiana and even right here near Pittsburgh, and it's gray and stark and wintry everywhere. I rather wish the occasional narration could have offered a sentence or two about why they have to so conspicuously avoid cities. Is there nothing left there, or are they too much hassle? There don't seem to be many people left, of whom too many have become cannibal gangs. You know you're in a bad way when your brightest moment is the discovery of an abandoned bomb shelter, and the man feels honor-bound to train his son how to shoot himself in the head, just to have that option open. The man is Viggo Mortensen, looking all too eerily like a lifelong homeless man, and thankfully it is the natural gentleness of his voice that reassures us of his humanity.

The movie itself is impossible to really enjoy, but I do enjoy how it offsets so much else. I think we've become awfully cavalier and jokey and daring about how we imagine and portray the collapse of civilization, but there is no Hollywood comic book wiggle room here: it would be simple flat-out horror, horror eerier than zombies or vampires. I'm glad – in very relative terms – it got made. Σ

PARSEC meeting schedule

March 13, 2010 – 1:00 PM to 4:45 PM

Topic: Confluence Topics, led by Ann Cecil and Kevin Hayes.

April 10, 2010 – 1:00 PM to 4:45 PM

Topic: Cyberpunk Apocalypse!

May 8, 2010

Topic: TBA

June 12, 2010

Topic: TBA

All meetings held at the Squirrel Hill branch of the Carnegie Public Library, unless otherwise noted.

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