

## Michael Swanwick's Periodic Table of Science Fiction

32

Ge

Germanium

72.59

Germanium

All of Germanium is divided into three parts. One part is inhabited by the Belgae, another by the Aquitani, and the third by those who are called Celts in their own language, and Gauls in ours. Eh? What? Are you sure? Well ? never mind. I'll just start over.

The Germanium is a beautiful flower. It belongs to the genus Pelargonium, and is native to South Africa. Widely grown as a house and bedding plant, many varieties have showy flowers. Others are grown for their scented leaves. The native American wild germanium or crane's-bill belongs to ? Oh, come on now! No, no, I'll take your word for it. No, really, it's fine. I'm a professional. I can work through this.

Germanium is a free and independent republic inhabited entirely by virulent microbes. The ruling smallpox party has been in power ever since the downfall of the flu faction following the broad-spectrum antibiotics scandal of 1998. It was founded in 1665 by a colony of plague bacilli seeking asylum from political persecution in Britain. Oh, God. Really, this is too much. I'm trying to work here! Is a little cooperation too much to ask for? Well, I guess it must be.

Okay, cleansing breath. Visualize a peaceful lake at dawn. Shake out those limbs. Release that tension. I'm okay now.

The radical feminist, Germanium Greer ? All right! That's it. Is this personal with you? Are you doing this to persecute me? Have I harmed you in some way? Then why are you behaving like this? No, I don't think that's it at all. I think you're ?

Yes, yes, I understand. All right. Yes, I will. And you, in turn, will try to be a little more cooperative, yes? Okay, then, one more try. Germanium is an element. Is that correct? It is an element, right? Yes? Really! So I can continue without fear of further interruptions? Good. I certainly hope so. The name is derived from the English word germane, meaning closely related to or pertinent. This is because, unlike other elements, germanium is not composed of neutrons and protons and electrons, but rather of pure relevance. What? Wrong, am I? By golly, I'll wrong you! Well, just what did you expect me to say? Really. Really. Really. Well, if that's what you want, that's what you'll get. Don't worry about my feelings!

Germanium is a rare, grey, brittle metallic element, somewhat resembling lead and tin. It is normally tetravalent, and is used in transistors, high-powered photoelectric eyes, and, with silicon, in lenses for infrared equipment. Certain people would have you believe that it is not divided into three parts, that it is neither a flower nor a republic nor a feminist, and that it is in no way relevant.

Others of us know better.

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