

Nice Distinctions Nine

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Hello again. Another three months, another issue. Kevin is still working for a corporation; Bernadette is still teaching, tutoring, and writing; and I'm still doing freelance proof-reading and copy-editing. We just got back from the International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts, and loved it (report nextish).

I continue to get a great deal of pleasure from livejournal, on which I am **supergee**. Much of what you see here started there.

Out There

George Bush, perhaps dared to find a worse attorney general than John Ashcroft, chose Alberto Gonzalez, who has said that the Geneva Convention provisions on torture have been "rendered quaint."

James Dobson, America's leading advocate of nonconsensual spanking, apparently accused SpongeBob SquarePants of gayness, but later explained it was really something worse: tolerance.

The government presented a legal theory about secret detention that is so good the theory itself has to be kept secret. (You can't make this stuff up.)

Bush is going to set aside lotsa money for a program to prepare man/woman couples for Real Marriage. Has anyone figured out why we hets need such a big remedial program?

In the department of literalized metaphors, a "media whore" turned out to be a whore. Jeff Gannon/James Guckert's oral skills include the presentation of set-up lines taken from right-wing propaganda.

M. Scott Peck, who used to offer inspiring advice on what to do when life gives it to you up the road less traveled, has now decided it's Satan's fault and is doing exorcisms. Lest you think he has gone mad, a prime example of such influence is the Supreme Court decision in *Gore v. Bush*.

A conference on preventing suicide among gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transsexuals was not allowed to mention the groups it was talking about. Presumably the delicate sensibilities of mental health professionals were being protected.

Pat Robertson claims to have beaten the ACLU in a case where the ACLU filed a brief supporting his side.

Al Neuharth, hardly a wild-eyed radical, suggested that we support the troops by bringing them home. In Free Republic and similar venues, people immediately began asking why he hadn't been executed for treason.

A group of Germans protested our foreign policy by sticking American flags in dog poop.

Robert Anton Wilson writes:

I don't believe anything, but I have many suspicions.

I strongly suspect that a world "external to," or at least independent of, my senses exists in some sense.

I also suspect that this world shows signs of intelligent design, and I suspect that such intelligence acts via feedback from all parts to all parts and without centralized sovereignty, like Internet; and that it does not function hierarchically, in the style of an Oriental despotism, an American corporation, or Christian theology.

I somewhat suspect that Theism and Atheism both fail to account for such decentralized intelligence, rich in circular-causal feedback.

<<http://www.rawilson.com/thoughts.shtml>>

Recent Reading

I called my very first zine *The Diagonal Relationship*, after an idea in a C.M. Kornbluth story that writers, because of their breadth of interests, would be able to combine ideas from a number of different areas and come up with a Grand Theory of Everything. (The story is called “MS. Found in a Chinese Fortune Cookie”; it’s in the NESFA Kornbluth collection, *That Share of Glory*; and I recommend it. It also includes what may be the first fictional mention of LSD and an alarmingly plausible explanation of the best-seller lists.) Anyway, I have not found such a theory, but I tend to enjoy writers who take that approach. In the end they are nibbled to death by the blunt bills of Experts, but they’re fun to read and there’s always something left after the specialists have had their feast.

Thus Malcolm Gladwell, whose second book, *Blink*, is now out. It’s about making instantaneous decisions, advantages and problems thereof. Not only do I like it, but David Brooks doesn’t, and I am convinced that the *Times* created their new conservative columnist among the putrid vapors of their underground laboratory by cloning William Safire and cutting out the good parts.

Rising from the Rails, by Larry Tye, is a story of human courage in the face of (manmade) adversity. After the Civil War (anyone who tells me I should have said “War between the States” will be pointed and snickered at if he ever uses the phrase *political correctness*), one of the few jobs better than sharecropping that were open to African Americans was that of Pullman porter, and there were ways in which it was not a whole lot better. (It was customary to call all porters George, as if they were the property of George Pullman. The only objection came from white men named George.)

Tye tells us of the men who used this modest help to bring their families out of poverty, and of A. Philip Randolph, who unionized the porters and made them into a political force. It’s inspiring, and I wouldn’t be at all surprised if there are white people who could do as well.

John Varley was a great Idea Writer in the 70s. His stories looked to a time (perhaps past a Singularity, though that term had not yet

been coined) when humanity had risen above the petty constraints of flesh, where sex change was easy and reversible, where the mind could be separated from the body. That, however, was an old *episteme*. Now science is believed to have explained mind away and replaced it with “consciousness.” I, however, am an unreconstructed dualist, and so I welcome *The John Varley Reader*, a greatest-hits collection (“Overdrawn at the Memory Bank,” “Gotta Sing Gotta Dance,” “Beatnik Bayou,” etc.), with charming reminiscences of the author’s hippie days and a few uncollected stories, including his contribution to *The Last Dangerous Visions*. Highly recommended.

Even a minor book by John Sladek is a pleasure. *Wholly Smokes* is a slight entertainment, a secret history of America as the product of machinations of an imagined tobacco company. Not up to the novels, but fun.

Planet Simpson, by Chris Turner, is one of those showbiz studies that tell us not only what an important sociological event the show in question is, but also what an amazingly perceptive fellow the author of the study is to have noticed all that stuff. It is the prose equivalent of a badly edited rerun compilation with even duller, windier, and more annoying commercials.

Sin-a-Rama is a Feral Press collection of covers of 60s softcore porn, with essays by Earl Kemp, who published the stuff and eventually went to jail for doing an illustrated version of the President’s Commission report on pornography (the first one—the sane one); Robert Silverberg, who wrote 150 mildly dirty books; and others. It’s fun, though even a tit man could get tired of all those drawings of antigrav boobs.

Love All the People is a collection of transcriptions of performances by the late Bill Hicks. It’s repetitious, but Hicks was a sick MF, he said admiringly. When Bill Clinton bombed Iraq because they had tried to assassinate Bush I, Hicks said:

We should have shamed them. We should have killed him ourselves and said, “That’s how you do it, towelheads.”

David Neiwert, who gives us the excellent Orcinus blog, has written a report on *Death on*

the Fourth of July. A racist skinhead gang, displaying Nazi symbols, threatened two young Asians, one of whom stabbed the leader of the gang to death in self-defense and had to stand trial for murder. Niewert makes the point that the Asians should have been treated as potential victims of a hate crime, rather than an ordinary assault, thus strengthening the case for self-defense to the point where perhaps there shouldn't even have been a trial.

Higher, by Neal Bascomb (who has since written the history of the four-minute mile that I praised a while back), is a tale of the late 20s and the race between the builders of the Chrysler Building and the Manhattan Company Building to create the world's largest skyscraper, only to be driven to irrelevance by the crash of the economy that nourished it, and then snuck past by the Empire State Building. The people make the story, and Bascomb makes them interesting.

Stephen Spender, a friend of W.H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, was gay in his twenties (the century's thirties), then married a woman and (on the second try) appeared to live happily ever after. Some people would conclude from those data alone that he matured; a smaller group, that he sold out. (I wouldn't guess either without further info, but it appears that he had no chance to try heterosexuality in his first 21 years—an all-too-common problem more than a quarter of a century later—but he took to it once he had the chance.) I learned that from reading John Sutherland's excellent *Stephen Spender: A Literary Life*. Spender, who wrote poetry, novels, memoirs, and essays, was not major at any of those, but was competent and had a Zelig-like closeness to literary history. Gay and radical in the 30s, teaming up with a woman Lillian Hellman later falsely claimed to know in helping people escape the Nazis, in London as the rockets were coming down, editing a literary journal that turned out to be a CIA front, writing the first book about the student riots of 1968, eventually coming out, then being attacked by a proponent of the sell-out theory who stole large chunks of Spender's own book to do so. Fascinating story. Peter Parker's *Isherwood: A Life Revealed* tells us about Spender's more famous friend.

If magical realism can be written in a language other than Spanish, then *Trash Sex Magic*, by Jennifer Stevenson, is such a book. Rich white corporations try to run roughshod over the locals (in this case at a trailer camp) and Call Up That Which They Cannot Put Down. It's a lively, sexy romp, with charming characters and many laughs.

John Whiteside Parsons was a literal rocket scientist who got himself involved with Aleister Crowley and L. Ron Hubbard and wound up suspiciously blowing himself up. At least some of the story is available in *Strange Angel*, by George Pendle.

Prometheus Books, the Humanist publisher, has started a science fiction line, Pyr, and they are off to an awesome start. They have imported two sf books that should have been published in the U.S. years ago: John Meaney's *Paradox*, in which mathematical and logical space is explored, and (scheduled for April) Sean Williams's complex and inventive future police procedural, *The Resurrected Man*. They are also reviving my favorite of Robert Silverberg's 80s books, *Star of Gypsies*. I'm of the school that believes that the "New Wave" Silverberg of the late 60s is the great one, but *Star of Gypsies* keeps some of the virtues of those books, with more scenic background and a stronger central character than those books.

Grace Paley is a person I admire and respect. She is a marvelously perceptive short-story writer whose characters say things like "He gave me a broom for Christmas. Nobody can tell me that was right" and "Have you noticed that after a while you love the kids more and the man less?" (both reported by Joyce Carol Oates). She is also an egalitarian, an activist, and a biophile. I was looking through a book of interviews with her, and I noticed that she was asked about whether writing helps one deal with life. She replied that she doesn't want to "deal with" life; she wants to live it. I want to deal with life. When I have to sup with it, I want to use as long a spoon as possible.

Top 20

I just got the fourth issue of *Steam Engine Time*, a zine about science fiction whose only flaw has been its infrequency. It's available at <efanzines.com>, and a change of editors (Bruce Gillespie is now joined by Janine Stinson) has not meant a loss of quality. In the delay and confusion, though, at least one thing was lost: my letter of comment. The first issue included a number of lists of the 20 best sf books of the last 20 years of the century, including one that included other stuff because sf "doesn't exist in a vacuum" Here's what I wrote in reply [updates added]:

I liked the Essential 20 SFs, which is to say I liked the 4 real ones and could live without "20 of My Favorite Things and Screw the Topic." OK, maybe that's a bit excessive, but I've never seen anybody who said that something I like "doesn't exist in a vacuum" go on to talk about other things I like. This was no exception.

I might have left it to the knowledgeable individuals already present, but I noticed to my horror that nobody had mentioned Greg Egan, or Paul Di Filippo, or Bruce Sterling. Something had to be done.

So, my very own 20. It's sf, by which I mean science fiction and stuff that feels to me like science fiction. I'm happy to draw a bright, if somewhat fuzzy line around that: Peter Straub's Blue Rose series is magnificent, but is Not What We're Talking About. *Essential* is a suitably vague word, which I would use to cover some combination of the overlapping categories of Important, Good, and I Like; the use of multiple categories makes it possible to say that the book being complained about, regardless of whether included or ex-, is actually under one of the other shells.

Gene Wolfe—*Book of the New Sun*. Of course.

John Clute—*Encyclopedias*. Of course.

Neal Stephenson—*Snow Crash*. Of course.

Ursula K. Le Guin—*Four Ways to Forgiveness*. Of course.

William Gibson—*Neuromancer*. Of course, but in my heart of hearts, he is a one-hit wonder. (I have since decided that Gibson is ten years ahead of his time, but his time was 1984.)

Greg Egan—*Permutation City*. Great metaphysical sf. [Still my favorite, but I'm prepared to agree that *Schild's Ladder* is even better.]

Paul Di Filippo—*Lost Pages*. Or *Ciphers*. Or *Ribofunk*. But you need something by him.

Bruce Sterling—*Schismatrix*. Continuing inventiveness. Mechs vs. shapers is a major metaphor.

Vernor Vinge—*A Fire upon the Deep*. Excellent hard sf, but I'm afraid what I remember best is the cute little doggies.

Samuel R. Delany—*Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand*. The best half novel in sf history.

Connie Willis—*Impossible Things*. *Fire Watch* may be better Serious Lit, but this one is sheer delight.

Rudy Rucker—*Software/Wetware/Freeware*. A series that started out excellent and evolves as our computer knowledge evolves. [Now with added *Realware*.]

Robert Anton Wilson—*Schrödinger's Cat*. Alternate physics paradigms and James Joyce, among other things.

Patrick O'Leary—*Door Number 3*. An apparently mimetic book that gets stranger and stranger.

Robert Silverberg—*Beyond the Safe Zone*. OK, so it's a collection of pre-1980 stories. It's a great collection, and sf is getting more retro all the time.

Ken MacLeod—*The Sky Road*. The best new political sf writer in years. [He continues to be remarkably inventive.]

Kathleen Ann Goonan—*Queen City Jazz/Mississippi Blues*. Nanotech as Lotsa Neat Stuff. [Haven't yet read the other two]

Patrick Nielsen Hayden—*Starlight 2*. Glad to see someone else picked 2. 1 was historically important because of its absence of theme, but 2 had better stories.

Tim Powers—*Last Call/Expiration Date/Earthquake Weather*. Gringo Magic Realism.

David Zindell—*Neverness*. I think as more people get familiar with this and the following books, they'll be an "of course."

Not forgotten

Jack L. Chalker 1944-2005

What I remember best about Jack was many years ago, when he called about some fannish business. We chatted, and I mentioned that I'd just bought a new Kaypro (by now I may have to add "computer") and I was a bit puzzled by it. He'd had one for a while, and he took the time and trouble to give me a lot of useful information.

Jack was hugely popular as a writer for a while, and then he wasn't popular anymore. I don't know which time the *mobile vulgus* was right. I thoroughly enjoyed *Midnight at the Well of Souls*, but I tend to drift away from series. At its best, his work showed rare energy and vision.

He also was an important contributor to small press/fan publishing, with Mirage Press, which published good books on J.R.R. Tolkien, Robert E. Howard, and others.

I grieve with his widow, Eva Whitley, and with his sons.

F.M. Busby was a similar figure on the West Coast, first known as a fan writer, then later writing sf, such as *Rissa Kerquelen* and *Zelde M'Tana*. I did not have the pleasure of meeting either him or **Anna Livia Plurabelle Vargo**, but people whose opinions I respect tell me I missed something in both cases, so I grieve with them too.

I first encountered **Guy Davenport** as the translator of *Carmina Archilochi*, the surviving fragments of the work of Archilochos, the ancient Greek poet best known for saying that the fox knows many things, but the one thing the hedgehog knows is a goodie. He translated every known fragment as a separate poem, including

the seam of the scrotum.

I later learned that he was a polymath, illustrator of books by his friend Hugh Kenner, author of short stories—some baffling, some (to the censorious mind) all too clear, and most of all a critic and essayist comparable to Kenner, which is about as good as it gets.

Arthur Miller wrote *Death of a Salesman*, *The Crucible*, and other good, if morally programmatic, plays. If nothing else, "Attention must

be paid to such a man" is the most aggressive passive in theatre history.

Humphrey Carpenter wrote good books about the Inklings, *The Brideshead Generation*, and Dennis Potter, among others.

Andre Norton was the great author of gateway sf, bringing in the young and impressionable. She lived 93 years, and I hope they were good ones.

Czeslaw Slania was, by common consent, the greatest postage stamp engraver ever. Working for Sweden and other countries, he made the world a more elegant place.

All honor to **Nicola Calipari**, who gave his life in the successful performance of his duty. The most positive interpretation of his killers is that they were ignorant, shit-scared, lost in a situation they could not understand, and yet blindly arrogant enough to obey that stupidest of movie clichés, "Shoot first and ask questions later." It is difficult to support the troops when they so resemble their commander in chief.

Texas Justice

No, it's not an oxymoron. An appeals court has thrown out the conviction of poor sick Andrea Yates, who killed her children, on the grounds that the state's chief expert witness was, in technical parlance, Making Up Shit. In particular, he said that she got the idea of pleading insanity from a *Law & Order* episode that turns out not to exist. That's a bit rank even for Texas. The wretched woman should have her tubes tied and get competent psychiatric help. Her husband, whose role in the whole sordid business was noted by observers at the trial, should at least get his tubes tied.

An Unsubstantiated Conjecture

Jeremy Rifkin and Leon Kass hate science because they themselves were a conjoined monstrous birth, blamed of course on radiation. They were eventually separated. Rifkin got the left wing; Kass got the right wing; and they each got half an ass.

The National Football League has a list of words one is not permitted to use in place of the player's last name on an Official NFL Jersey. Makes sense; you don't want to encourage people to wear obscenities, ethnic slurs, and such on their backs, but they banned the word GAY until they were reminded that one of the players in the recent Super Bowl was named Randall Gay.

A Cheering Thought

The Radical Right seems to be no brighter about using the Web than the students who believe that once you've cut and pasted something, it's yours, with no further problems:

1. Rep. Jim Gibbons (R-NV) denounced "liberal, tree-hugging, Birkenstock-wearing, hippie, tie-dyed liberals" and went on in that vein. This was not merely standard right-wing rant; it was stolen verbatim from a copyrighted harangue by one Beth Chapman, who is now suing him for plagiarism.
2. A right-wing group called USANext, in putting forth the dubious proposition that the American Association of Retired People is a Homintern front, published a photo of an actual two-man wedding. The happy couple, who of course had not given USANext permission to use their photo, are suing.

I am one of those who are tolerant of Christianity because we had the good fortune not to be exposed to much of it in our formative years, so I recognize it as a large and complex entity with some inspiring thinkers, some genuine saints by any reasonable standards, some corrupt bastards, and (a mathematical consequence of its majority status) a lot of dummies.

As I mentioned last time, sometimes the people who make up livejournal quizzes and such are a bit verbally challenged. When they asked, "What Kind of Super-Villain (sic) are you?" rather than take the quiz, I replied, "My Villain Name is *Der Grammarführer*. My two secret weapons are spelling, punctuation, and a fanatical devotion to Strunk & White. My Evil Hardware of Choice is a dictionary. My nemesis is the Googler. (But there are more hits for *this* spelling.)"

I am old and thus demographically challenged. I used to make occasional money participating in focus groups, but now that I am over 60, America's businesses are unwilling to pay to hear what I think. But recently I accepted an offer from *The New Yorker* for a "professional subscription" for less than 50¢/issue so they can tell the advertisers (where the real money is) that they are read by editors and other such high-class people. I'd rather be loved for myself alone, but we take what we can get.

Nasty, Brutish, and Short

If God had meant for us to have safe sex, He would have made rubber grow on trees.

Artificially sweetened majoun is Splenda in the grass.

The two things we should make it easy for the poor to get their hands on are birth control and computers.

Why is Michael Savage broadcasting instead of occupying a small room with nice soft walls?

elite (see also **Eastern elite, coastal elite, liberal elite**): a group of talented people who tell the masses not to do what rich white people want them to do.

Francis Fukuyama is making the other neocons look bad by trying to pull his head out of his ass.

That's haiku for you:
Run out of damned syllables
Before you even

On livejournal I was asked to give ten terms that define me (or at least help do so):

- Symbol-manipulating
- Introverted
- Gnostic
- Wise-ass
- Polymath
- Grizzled
- Liberal
- Elitist
- Poly (-amorist and -theist)
- Intuitive

Hoping you are the same,