

Nice Distinctions 7

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We are enduring, even prevailing more often than not. Unfortunately, though, our family has suffered two losses:

A few years ago, Bernadette's eldest sister, Haya, was diagnosed with cancer. She survived, but found the treatment so horrifying that when the cancer recurred, she chose the gentler, if less efficacious, methods of macrobiotics and homeopathy. Those worked for a while, but in April she took a turn for the worse. Bernadette flew out to be with her on June 15, but Haya died while Bernadette's plane was in the air. Fortunately, I was able to get a flight the next day to be there for her at the funeral.

I lost my cell phone en route, but it could have been worse. The widower's brother Bill traveled there too, only to suffer what turned out to be a perforated colon on the day of the funeral. I am happy to report that it was successfully treated. It transpires that Bill's greatest good luck is that one of Haya's fellow Public Safety workers in attendance was a former Vietnam medic. He asked Bill the triage questions, and then said, "You're going to the hospital."

"No, I'm alright."

"OK, I'll come back later with a body bag."

The combination of events led to a scary moment. We went to Haya's house the day after the funeral, but her husband, understandably shaken by the recent happenings, had turned on the burglar alarm and neglected to tell us he had done so. It's a good burglar alarm: We heard a continuing series of horrible noises, and before long a police officer had arrived. Fortunately, the officer was amenable to reason.

There were relatively small consolation prizes. Chance brought us to Chicago just the weekend of Jennifer Stevenson's pig picking celebrating the publication of *Trash Sex Magic*, so we got to attend that and literally sit at the feet of Gene Wolfe. We also got to shop at the delightful American Science & Surplus store.

Haya was a police officer (a sergeant), and when you combine her family's sense of humor with the police sense of humor, you get something awesome. She was, however, a good cop; she once was injured in the line of duty when she stepped between a handcuffed prisoner and a brother officer who was dishing out an anticipatory sentence. She was also a good sister, and we miss her.

About a month and a half later, we lost our beloved kittycat, Courageous. We adopted her when we moved up here in 1992 (when she was already an adult), and age and FIV finally did her in. I am not the biophilic pet person in the household, but Courageous was a great cat (as our rats are great rats): She was beautiful and affectionate.

Reminder

John Kerry is the one candidate who is not George W. Bush and can be elected. Vote.

Cheap and Centrally Located

The New York Times Magazine did an article Viewing With Alarm the casual way teenagers approach sex, and particularly oral sex, these days, with talk of "hooking up" and "friends with

benefits.” One problem with this is that teenage guys get away with getting oral sex but not giving, and of course I agree that those who aren’t willing to reciprocate don’t deserve to be blown. (And they’re missing something.) But some teenage females like the power of providing sexual pleasure, even without getting it in return.

The good news is that we’re approaching the great Sixties dream of cheap sex. I’ve got to explain what I mean by those words. In an essay on Joanna Russ, Samuel R. Delany pointed out the stupidity of seeing sex as a “substance,” particularly one a man “gets” from a woman. It’s an activity. *Cheap* does not mean “nasty”; it means “at lower cost.” Cheap sex is sex that doesn’t lead to girls bleeding to death in alleys from illegal abortions, or being frightened into ruining their lives by becoming teenage mothers. Cheap sex is not so desperately important that one has to hate and fear those who do it with others who have the same sort of plumbing.

G.K. Chesterton, who so often expresses with clarity and eloquence views I find repugnant, chortled in *What’s Wrong with the World* about the impossibility of “free love” when sex has consequences he likens to lightning and earthquakes. Cheap sex is about not having to treat sex with fear and awe like primitives cowering in their caves whenever there’s a storm.

Temporal Retromingency

Andrew Sullivan has condemned the Kerry campaign for using a line from the great poet Langston Hughes, who at times had nice things to say about Joseph Stalin. Sullivan is an example of the well-known practice of blaming people from the past for not knowing what we know. After Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot, it is reasonable to assume that efforts to enforce the economic dogmas of the Marxist creed are likely to kill millions, but the experiment was still in the early stages when Hughes wrote, and given the treatment America was dealing out to the pigmentationally challenged, it is understandable that Hughes was eager to find an alternative.

Of course, we’re more used to that from the other side: condemnations of H.L. Mencken for generalizing about the Jews in his private diaries or Mark Twain for not calling his character African American Jim. It doesn’t work either way.

Gratitude

I spent years looking for a culture of introverts (I didn’t know that was the key word), full of people who didn’t care much how they or others looked and considered small talk a desperate and unpleasant recourse of people who weren’t comfortable in their own heads. Science fiction fandom saved me.

Throw Away That Truss!

One of the many fascinating multiple-meaning statements Jesus made was, “Judge not that ye be not judged.” It has, among others, a theological meaning, a psychological meaning (many hypercritical, but not hypocritical, people are miserable because they don’t live up to their standards), and a practical meaning: Those who claim expert status in a particular area by publicly judging others are asking to be judged by their own performance in that area.

Which brings us to Lynne Truss and *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*. (I’ve always preferred the Australian version of the joke: A wombat is an animal that eats, roots, shoots, and leaves, *roots* being an Aussie sexual verb.) A while back Louis Menand reviewed the book in *The New Yorker* and pointed out that the first punctuation error appears in the dedication, and it doesn’t get better. As Menand points out, she ignores the rule that commas set off nonrestrictive clauses. (My own reading suggests that this flaw is common even among good British writers, and indeed some are proud of it. Why, it’s almost enough to make you think Standard English is better than Anglonics.)

Truss judged, and in turn she was judged, most justly.

Life Imitates *Illuminatus!*

Mark Thatcher (Margaret’s son) has been arrested for conspiring to overthrow the government of Fernando Poo (now part of Equatorial Guinea).

A memory

1990 or so: I could tell from the start that the album was regressive rock. It was Bob Dylan and a bunch of guys who sounded alarmingly like him, and then in the middle of the first cut, the most beautiful male voice in rock & roll history returned, singing, “I’m so tired of being lonely; I still have some love to give.” “Handle with Care” and the whole Traveling Wilburys album would have stood above their postmusical surroundings no matter what, but Roy Orbison’s last great performance raised them to a higher dimension.

Problems of Creativeness

In recent weeks there have been a study indicating that people are reading less fiction, or at least the rate of fiction reading is slower than the rate of population growth, and a *Times Magazine* article on the increased popularity of graphic novels to the point where they may threaten to outstrip textual fiction.

There are some indications that the former may represent not a decline in reading but a move from fiction to nonfiction. That certainly describes me. I have said that I have “reader’s block,” but that largely applies to novels. The attractions of Story, never as strong to me as to many of those I know, have faded, and what fiction I do read is more for people, ideas, and laughs than to find out What Happens Next.

There seems to be a general, often unspoken assumption that reading fiction (defined to include poetry and drama) is somehow nobler, more esthetic, or more intellectual than just reading facts. One critique of popular fiction and sf is that such writing is often adulterated with mere information, whether the history lessons in James Michener’s massive novels, the details of alien worlds in sf, or the background info on politics and espionage that Louis Menand derides as art substitutes in *The Manchurian Candidate*.

One honorific brandished in this discussion is the word *creative*. Fiction is *creative*; the other stuff isn’t. I have to say that the first time I heard the phrase *creative nonfiction*, I assumed that it had to be some sort of euphemism, perhaps to be substituted for “Bullshit!” in polite society as the House of Commons required Winston Churchill to use the phrase *terminological inexactitude*. But my beloved spouse, who teaches writing, points out:

[Creative nonfiction] is creative because you create something. It was a blank page, now it’s a book or article, and you made it! It’s also creative because nothing is strict, objective reporting—we pick the emotional tone, details, words, and so on.

Besides, how creative is most fiction? Much of what is published is recycling of common tropes with little or no originality, and even the good stuff has sources, some obvious. All of Shakespeare’s plots, except maybe *The Tempest*, are known to have been “stolen,” and some scholars believe that we just haven’t found the source of *The Tempest*.

Fahrenheit 9/11

We enjoyed it. It is creative nonfiction: obvious, not—how you say?—fair and balanced, and emotionally manipulative. In other words, it is agit-prop, rather than a meticulously footnoted text. There’s an old Madison Avenue saying: “Let’s get down on all fours and look at it from the customer’s point of view,” and the film appears to take that approach.

I certainly cringed at some of the movie (the crude economic determinism of the pipeline explanation and some evil-Arab symbolism), but it doesn’t actually lie, as so much right-wing agit-prop does. It’s not nuanced, but you can’t win an election with the people who appreciate nuance, nor can you win one without emotional appeals. (Dukakis lost because he didn’t pitch a shit fit at the mere possibility of his wife being assaulted.)

Nasty, Brutish, & Short

Ephedra was removed from the category of Natural Health Products when it was found to work.

I’m old-fashioned. I think children are hyperactive and teenagers are depressive, so one shouldn’t medicate either.

Reason for supporting diversity: The absence of it is BORING.

The tabloids write real-people fanfic.

Cell phones don't stink, but farts don't play silly little tunes.

Collectivists know the value of everything, and the price of nothing.

Traffic is the great counterexample to "One monkey don't stop no show."

I'm glad Orson Scott Card has started calling himself a conservative. It's like some guys come out of the closet, and their friends say, "We all knew. We're glad you found out."

Many ages could be Golden Ages if one could replace the lower classes with robots.

The current situation is so bad that Jeremy Rifkin can sound sane for paragraphs at a time.

Bush makes me want to puke when he accuses his enemies of "class war." War is most justified when it is defensive, and Bush's tax cuts are Fort Sumter, if not Pearl Harbor.

There are two kinds of people in the world: radio button and checkbox. I'm checkbox.

The first preliminary qualification for the elite is being able to spell it.

Nixon was worse, but Reagan did worse.

Recent Reading

Set This House in Order, by Matt Ruff, won this year's Tiptree Award, and it's by the author of *Sewer, Gas, & Electric*, a huge hilarious conspiracy tale in the tradition of *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Illuminatus!*, and *Ciphers*, so of course I wanted to read it. I was right. It's a story of two multiple personalities, one of whom does not know she is a multiple, and it's fascinating, heart-wrenching, and surprising, by turns. Strongly recommended.

Doomed by an inoperable cancer he had named Rupert (after Mr. Murdoch), Dennis Potter set his own house in order by writing linked miniseries for the two networks he had promised them to, and beat the deadline with some remarkable work. *Karaoke* is a typical Potter metafiction, with a writer finding himself unable to separate his life from his work. (The title refers to the condition of performing another's work.) *Cold Lazarus* is a truly science-fictional sequel in which the protagonist of *Karaoke*, who had his head frozen when he knew he was going to die, is brought back to consciousness in a future even more dominated by media giants than the present.

John Gregory Dunne's last novel, *Nothing Lost*, is a departure from his usual work, set in a Midwestern state and narrated by Max Cline, a gay Jewish lawyer, not the more Dannelike Jack Broderick (who is in fact killed off in a bizarre fashion fairly early in the book). It centers around the apparently motiveless killing of a black man by two poor white losers. ("Violence is the way stupid people try to level the playing field," we are told.) The case attracts grotesques from showbiz and politics, and the author takes sardonic pleasure in describing all of them. (Just as many sources means research in nonfiction, Dunne has taken historical facts and characters and recombined. The murder resembles an actual case Dunne reported for *The New Yorker*, with relevant differences. The fictional college football star who has dragged his girlfriend down several flights of stairs but cannot be punished in any way that would keep him out of the bowl game is a white nose tackle from a rich family, rather than a black running back whose NFL career was short because his considerable talents were outweighed by his general assholery.) Eventually, Max finds that the killing was not what it appeared to be, but the plot is wrenched violently aside by two characters whose behavior is subtly foreshadowed, and then there is what the insurance companies call an act of God, an *acte gratuite* as such things so often are, and we rush to the finish. (Perhaps Dunne, like Potter, knew he was writing on borrowed time.) Still the richly described vanity fair of characters was enough to make me enjoy the book.

I am not fond of Lewis H. Lapham, he understated, but as Michael Frayn once said about the pope, I think he's got the right end of the stick this time. *Gag Rule* is a thoughtful look at the

Patriot Act and other attempts to give the illusion of security, richly embroidered with historical analogies. Of course there's a bit of his usual jihad against "narcissism," but mostly the book is worthwhile.

The blues is becoming a popular subject for biographies. Robert Gordon did a good job on Muddy Waters with *Can't Be Satisfied*, and now *Moanin' at Midnight*, by James Segrest and Mark Hoffman, gives us an equally thorough portrayal of Muddy's great friend/rival, the gigantic (in size and talent) Howlin' Wolf. My favorite line in it is Wolf's remark to a heckler:

Lady, let me tell you something: If you don't leave me alone, I'm going to put a bomb on the end of my penis, and I'm going to shoot you to the moon faster than the astronauts went.

Yet another book about the writers of the Roaring Twenties? *Bobbed Hair and Bathtub Gin*, by Marion Meade, makes it new by focusing on the female writers, such as Dorothy Parker (subject of Meade's earlier *What Fresh Hell Is This?*), Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Edna Ferber. For me this book, like all the Twenties Writers books, drags when it gets to that wretched and mutually deserving couple, the Fitzgeralds. Maybe it's just that I read *The Great Gatsby* forty years ago, when it was forty years old, and considered it a tedious little period piece featuring a bunch of rich turds I could not bring myself to care about, so I cannot consider its author worthy of special attention or excuse. William Faulkner said that a great writer should be willing to kill his grandmother for his art because "The Ode on a Grecian Urn' is worth any number of old ladies." *The Great Gatsby* may not have been worth one.

Lawrence Block got his start working in Earl Kemp's Nightstand porn factory, metaphorically alongside Robert Silverberg and Donald E. Westlake, and he belongs in that company. He has gone on to write high-quality crime fiction. Like many sf writers, he excels in the short lengths, and now we have *Enough Rope*, a massive omnibus of his crime stories, where you can meet Martin Ehrengraf, whose clients always turn out to be innocent; Matthew Scudder, the alcoholic detective; Bernie Rhodenbarr, burglar and used-book dealer; Keller the Killer; and more. Not all the stories are great of course, but there's a high percentage of goodies.

Nat Hentoff is a strong, consistent defender of the First Amendment, and a fanatical, extreme fetus fan. (Some might say that it's the other way around.) His political writing is so noteworthy that one is tempted to forget that he started out as a jazz critic. *Listen to the Stories* is a collection of his writings on jazz and country music (which he now also respects) that gets something of the music across to even someone with as solidly stannous an ear as mine. The autobiographical *Speaking Freely* offers a good look at his multifaceted life.

1964 was Terry Southern's year. It says so in his son Nile Southern's *The Candy Men*, and it's true: *Dr. Strangelove* hit the movie screens; *Candy* was atop (as it were) the best-seller list; *The Magic Christian*, almost unnoticed in hardcover, flashed its weirdness at the world in paper covers. The sad part is that Southern had so totally burned out by then. Like Dylan Thomas and Alfred Bester, he followed early years of seemingly endless creativity with failed efforts to recapture. Perhaps my first hint was at the end of that *annus mirabilis*, when I saw *The Loved One*. (The IMDB disagrees with me on the date; perhaps I saw a preview, as I had of *Dr. Strangelove* the previous year.) In any event, the film included images even I found dubious, but when I turned to the Evelyn Waugh novel, I found all the Good Parts (offensive and otherwise) right there, in black and white. And then there was nothing: the hugely disappointing *Blue Movie*, efforts to be too offensive for *National Lampoon*, the desperate claim that all the good parts of *Easy Rider* were his. Nile tells the sad story, and that of Candy's comparably talented coauthor, Mason Hoffenberg.

Walter Yetnikoff, then president of Columbia Records, was the prime symbol of the sex-booze-and-coke-sodden 80s music scene, and he has told his story to David Ritz in *Howling at the Moon*. He's been clean for years, but he fails to sound repentant, and he speaks admiringly of

mobsters like Morris Levy and Fred DiSipio. This is a nasty book. (I must admit I haven't laughed as hard since David Wells's autobio.)

One of the last successful KKKillings took place in Oxford, NC, in 1971. A young black man, in a store owned by a white sheet wearer, made the mistake of uttering a suggestive remark, probably aimed at one of the black women in the vicinity, and the kluck thought it was meant for his daughter-in-law, so he and two of his moronic spawn chased the black man down and shot him point blank. An all-white jury acquitted the perps. Timothy B. Tyson was then a ten-year-old white preacher's kid whose father was trying to bring racial peace and liberalism to the town, and he has now told the story in *Blood Done Sign My Name*. It's a powerful, compassionate tale, much of it told in a biracial Southern demotic prose that at times reaches the heights attained by Andy Duncan.

In politics *everyone* regards themselves as a moderate, because they know some other sumbitch who's twice as crazy as they are.

Edwin Williamson's *Borges: A Life* offers an admirably detailed look at the master—his family history; his troubled romantic life (he may never have actually had sex); his friends and colleagues and their literary movements; his political beliefs, from early radicalism through the conflict with Juan Peron (the Pat Buchanan of his time), who attempted to change his title from Librarian to Chicken Inspector, and his dealings with the generals who were oppressing his native land, until his final move to Geneva. The bad news is that the discussion of the work is the kind of more-Freudian-than-Freud psychobiographical criticism that flourished in the last century, in which the great stories are reduced to symptoms of the author's feelings of insignificance and isolation. If the work were as dull as what Williamson describes, why would anyone want to read 500 pages about its creator?

Martin B. Duberman has already written an excellent book called *Stonewall*, but David Carter's new book with the same title offers added insights. Carter believes that Judy Garland's death had little to do with the riots and suggests the original linkage was a het joke. He also offers evidence that the reason for the raid was not so much to make gay people miserable as to crack down on one of the mobsters who ran the club, Ed "The Skull" Murphy, who appears to have been using Stonewall as part of a large and successful operation of entrapping and blackmailing successful closeted gays, one that may have reached even Clyde Tolson, then the FBI's prince consort.

Not forgotten

There were deaths outside our family as well, including two people we knew in person:

George Flynn got a Ph.D. in science and coauthored a couple of textbooks, then turned to professional copy-editing and proofreading, at which he excelled. In turn, he applied his editorial and organizational skills to conspicuous service inconspicuously rendered for the New England Science Fiction Association (NESFA), which is running Worldcon even as I write. He deserves much of the credit for those marvelous archives of the work of great sf writers (Cordwainer Smith, Fredric Brown, Robert Sheckley, et al.) that NESFA Press publishes. He and I communicated in person about as well as you would expect of two shy guys who can't hear, but I sent him my zine and always found his comments helpful and amusing. Once I printed my old college freshman picture, and he was the one who noticed they got my middle initial wrong. My favorite George Flynn line is, "You know you've been in fandom too long when you see *The Shining* and find yourself evaluating the function space."

We also lost Iain O'Cain, whose wedding I had the pleasure of attending several years ago. He died way too early, poisoned by the vile depressive chemicals his own body generated. I hope that psychochemistry is still in its infancy.

Good-bye to Ray Charles, the Genius; to William Manchester, a successful historian whose bio of H.L. Mencken, *Disturber of the Peace*, pleased me, and who unfortunately did not live to complete his popular multivolume biography of Winston Churchill; and to Pete Graham, who may have been the first to say that the Golden Age of Science Fiction is twelve.

And to Julia Child, who brought the pleasures of gourmet cooking and eating into the American home and obviously beat the game in one sense, as she ate lots of nutritionally incorrect things and lived into her nineties.

And to Bernard Levin, who unfortunately was little known on this side of the Atlantic, but who wrote *The Pendulum Years*, an eloquent and witty history of the 60s, in which he said that world-class wowser Malcolm Muggeridge “came to regard education as scarcely to be distinguished, in its vileness, from sex.”

And Fay Wray, to whom Merian C. Cooper once said, “You will have the tallest, darkest leading man in film history” (Thomas Pynchon’s joke), and Marlon Brando, who early in his career said, “An actor is a geek who gets \$100,000 per chicken head.” (Obviously many years, and much inflation, ago.)

Me Me Me

I was recently examined, and I turned out to be OK. This time medical science didn’t even have to go up the cloaca maxima in a glass-bottomed boat.

I’m not doing as much paid proofreading and copy-editing as I’d like, but I’m doing some and enjoying it. I continue to write for livejournal (as supergee), and I invite you all to take a look if you are not doing so already. I’ve done some more work for wikipedia, the open-source encyclopedia, and I have discovered wikiquote, a similarly produced quotation file, and contributed to that.

There was a discussion of zine writing on the fanzine mailing lists. Some like to know who will be reading their work, but it occurs to me that my feeling about my writing is like the sociobiological male attitude towards semen: Share it with a chosen few, but also scatter it promiscuously as long as it doesn’t cost me anything and won’t get me into trouble.