

# Nice Distinctions 10

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Hello again. Bernadette, Kevin, and I continue to survive. Kevin is still working a respectable job; Bernadette's schedule has eased a bit after a few months of intensively tutoring a homeschooled adolescent, and I'm doing some copy-editing after an alarmingly long period in which the New York publishing biz failed to realize its desperate need for me.

We've had a habitat renewal of massive proportions, and we can now see large areas of floor and rug whose existence was previously a matter for faith. We have a new dishwasher (still operated by me), and my asthma prescription has moved up to Advair. This has been the mundane section.

Of course, like everyone else, we're concerned about terrorist organizations, including the one the Freeway Blogger refers to as the Executive Branch Davidians.

Oh, yes, and in the immortal words of Mark Slackmeyer,

## **GUILTY GUILTY GUILTY**

### ICFA report

This was the year you could almost imagine that I had drawn up the guest list for the International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts. The Guest of Honor was Rudy Rucker, with whom I attended Swarthmore 10, these many years ago, and whose novels and nonfictional mathematical and computer books have wondrously expanded my mind. The Guest Scholar was Damien Broderick, an astute critic who speaks Pomo like a native

and is a comparably fascinating sf writer, whom I had enjoyed meeting on the Internet (and once in person). The Guest Author was John Kessel, an old friend from my years in North Carolina who has written complex and intriguing literary sf. As usual, my spouse, Bernadette Bosky, and my cohusband, Kevin Maroney, joined me for the fun. (I should mention that Bernadette takes much better notes than I do, and I always make off with her notebook to compose these reports.)

The first full day was supposed to begin with "An Anatomy of the New Wave Controversy," by Rob Latham, but he announced that such a project was too large for a twenty-minute paper, so he would discuss only one part: M. John Harrison. (Courtesy forbids me from discussing which anatomical part I might consider Mr. Harrison to be.) In fact, Latham limited himself to Harrison's critical writings. He made the best possible case for those writings, reminding us of the wretchedest excesses of the Old Wave sf Harrison was reacting to and suggesting a certain amount of exaggeration for effect, but I was not able to purge from my mind the image of Harrison as a kind of sfnal Oliver Cromwell or Jonathan Edwards, warning that one's soul is endangered by enjoying what one reads. (I should add that many people whose opinions I respect consider Harrison an excellent novelist, but I've never been able to bring myself to read the fiction of someone whose view of the literary experience is that puritanical.)

The next session was "Holy Seeing: Art and the Fantastic." Judith Kerman showed us a video she made of a *carnaval* in the Dominican Republic. Some of the participants make remarkably beautiful costumes out of plastic bottles and other urban detritus, and the government tries to minimize the political significance of the celebrations. Then Joan Gordon discussed Neil Gaiman and Charles Vess's *The Wake*, with its parallels to the creator's valedictory Prospero delivers in *The Tempest*. I enjoyed the third presentation even more. Michael Johnson discussed "Melting Watches in the Wardrobe: Synchronicity in Works by Salvador Dali and C.S. Lewis." While I did not emerge from the discussion with a strong sense of linkage between the two disparate artists, I enjoyed what Johnson said (and more important, showed) about each. In particular, he demonstrated how Dali fractally

embeds in his paintings smaller references to other works: his own and personal favorites like Millet's *Angelus*. (There are pictures within pictures for those who know how to look.) I was dressed all too appropriately. Years ago, Bernadette bought me a T-shirt portraying *The Persistence of Memory* with the molten watches replaced by similarly shaped Holstein cows, titled "Salvador Dairy." We did not consciously recall that there was to be a Dali paper at the conference when we packed it, but the, er, synchronicity was too good to ignore, and I wore the shirt that day. Johnson was amused.

The luncheon speech, by GoH Rucker, was entitled "Seek the Gnarl." The Gnarl is a useful critical concept, defined as "a level of complexity that lies between predictability and randomness." As examples, he mentioned the work of Burroughs, Borges, and Pynchon. He added that in his own work, one way he aims for the Gnarl is transrealism, mixing elements of transcendence—magic, superscience—with realistic elements, some from his own life. He added that his early novels tended to feature a protagonist who closely resembled his creator, but now he's learned to add bits and pieces of other real people to the main character and bits of himself to the other fictional people. He also mentioned that Philip K. Dick's *A Scanner Darkly* was described on the back of the British edition as "a transcendental autobiography." (I never found that book credible enough, but we have now learned that when Dick was writing it, W. Mark Felt's main FBI duty was to track down Deep Throat.)

Thence to the Theory Round Table, which this year dealt with Justine Larbalestier's fascinating *The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction*. I learned that it represents the sort of literary criticism associated with the French journal *Annales*, with its use of "nonliterary materials"—in this case the lettercols of '30s sf magazines, in which the adolescent Isaac Asimov and others complained about having all those icky GURLS in their stories.

In the last slot of the day, Bernadette was chairing a session on Radical Fantasy, which is not exactly my stick of tea (as we quaint old hipsters say). I went off to hear Faye Ringel discuss medievalism in science fiction, from the elements of both in *Star Wars* to the Society for Creative Anachronism, which was begun by Poul Anderson, Marion Zimmer Bradley, and other science fiction people, among others. There was also a paper entitled,

"Transnational Imaginaries: Native Giveaways, Neotribalism, Scarification, and Tales of Survivance in Neil Stephenson's *Snow Crash* and *Diamond Age*, China Mieville's *The Scar*, and Gerald Vizenor's *Hiroshima Bugi: Atomu 57*." I copied that down in my notebook and was too tired to take any other notes.

That evening we had dinner in the hotel with Rudy Rucker and enjoyed it. The following evening we did likewise with Damien Broderick. Or maybe it was the other way around. (I do remember that I enjoyed both.) We also had meals with Peter Straub, Jennifer Stevenson, and Sondra Swift and family.

Rudy's wife Sylvia was also at Swarthmore back then, and this was the first time I'd had the pleasure of seeing her in 40 years. I praised her for putting up with him for that long, and she asked if I still played bridge, as that seemed to be the only thing I did at school. I replied, "No, I drank, too." These days I do neither.

In the first session Friday morning I wanted to see Bernadette present her paper on "Liminal Spaces and Liminal States in John Crowley's *Little, Big*," but duty beckoned: I chaired a session entitled "Boundaries and Borders in Modern Fantasy" that included Judith Berman (who is not Judith Kerman and vice versa) on myths of preliterate societies (I loved the image of Coyote signing a treaty with the Queen of England), Stefan Ekman on the nature/culture divide in fantasy, and Breken Rose Hancock's meticulous analysis of wilderness and other postcolonial themes in Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Rider*—all very good papers. I did get to read Bernadette's paper, and it's marvelous. Crowley himself arrived later, was given a copy of her paper, and enjoyed it.

There are always people whose papers, like Bernadette's this year, I don't get to see (despite how interesting they sound) because of this universe's arbitrary taboos against bilocation. This time around they included Jeri Zulli (the alphabetically last shall be first), Sharon King, Irma Hirsjarvi, and Permanent Special-Guest Scholar (not an official title) Donna Hooley.

The second session I attended was called "Savage Humanism and the Limits of Imagination." Who can resist a title like that? But the "savage humanism" was from a scheduled paper by Fiona Kelleghan on John Kessel and Tim Sullivan, and she wasn't able

to be there. It turned out to be a *felix culpa*. One of the other scheduled papers was David Dickens on W.G. Sebald's *Vertigo*. I learned that Sebald, whom I had thought of as a nostalgic old guy who wrote novels with fading photos in them, may be far more interesting than that, as the book under discussion is a series of semisurrealistic travel accounts of strange lands, some of which may be imaginary, not unlike the work of Borges.

Meanwhile, Kevin was applying his comics knowledge at a panel called "Queer Eye for the Caped Guy." Like many people, I first got the idea that Batman and Robin had a thing going from Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent*. (He said it as if there were something wrong with it.) I thought it would be amusing if the whole concept had sprung from Wertham's fevered and censorious brain, and from time to time I have asked older gay men if that image had been in the gay culture before Wertham. It was, but then there was so little openly aimed at their interests. I guess it proves that need for something to identify with and need for something to condemn are both helpful in finding things that the rest of us miss.

Scholar GoH Damien Broderick gave the luncheon speech. He has written a number of critical books, including the highly theoretical and textbook-priced *Reading by Starlight* and the more verbally and financially accessible *x, y, z, t: Dimensions of Science Fiction*. One additional good thing about the conference was a publishers' discount on *Reading by Starlight* and Brian Attebery's brilliant *Decoding Gender in Science Fiction* to prices that were merely exorbitant, so I bought both. Broderick talked about science fiction as one big "megatext" that gives us "conceptoids" such as flying saucers, advanced logic, algorithmic robots, parapsychology, space drives, parallel and divergent worlds, cryonics, virtual realities, deros, gene engineering, nanotech, the Singularity... but he is bicultural enough that he included the phrase, "toujours gai. there's a dance in the old genre yet."

Lunch was followed by the conference's first-ever designated Science Lecture, named after Rudy Rucker's forthcoming nonfiction book, *The Lifebox, the Seashell, and the Soul*. Rucker has been greatly influenced by Richard Wolfram's theory that all of reality can be seen as computational. He himself has worked with cellular automata (like John Horton Conway's

Game of Life and a number he has designed himself), which produce gnarly patterns—neither too predictable nor too random. He showed us some marvelous ones. I'm going to grab the book as soon as it comes out.

An hour of the evening was devoted to a dialogue between two learned gentlemen: Peter Straub and John Crowley. Straub discussed editing the Library of America collection of H.P. Lovecraft's writings (he was happy to find Lovecraft's work much better than he had thought), and Crowley talked about Lord Byron, whom he has ventriloquized in a new novel, *The Evening Land*. They also remarked about gnostic and hermetic ideas, both as sources of fictional imagery and as philosophies. Crowley suggested that gnostics see reality as like a novel, an idea that makes sense to me, though I hope its author is as skilled as those two.

The slashers were there again. We all escaped unbloodied, as this is the group that uses the term to refer to sexually transgressive fan fiction (sort of like Dr. Wertham, only enjoying it and encouraging the readers to do likewise). I always go to at least one of their sessions, and this time I attended the Saturday morning one on *Lord of the Rings* fanfic, at which Barbara Lucas gave a new meaning to "and in the darkness bind them," Robin Anne Reid discussed relations between fanfic communities, and Eden Lackner considered real-people slash. I feel a bit squeamish about the latter sort of thing, though there is something tempting in the thought of creating one called "Beat Me, Whip Me, Make Me Get You a Press Pass." (I imagine it's been done already.) Later in the day, Kevin went to another such session and became a useful resource, pointing out that role-playing-game theory has some parallels with the theory of fanfic.

The last session I attended was a panel on the writings of John Kessel. The panelists mentioned his moral seriousness, not only in his fiction but also in the incisive paper he presented at the conference a few years ago on *Ender's Game* as "guiltless genocide." They also discussed the high literary value of his work and did not fail to add that it's fun to read. The combination of those three factors makes the session a good symbol for the International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts as a whole.

## Pope Mary Sue

As the cardinals gathered to elect a new pontiff, I was reminded of a novel on the subject: *Hadrian VII*, by Frederick Rolfe. It is a work of pure wish fulfillment: The College of Cardinals cannot agree on a new pope and turns to George Arthur Rose, an author surrogate, apologizing for the wrongs the Church has done him and asking him if he will accept the papacy. (Wishing the nonfictional church would do the same for Hans Küng was what got me started on this train of thought.) Rolfe, like Ronald Firbank, was very Catholic and very gay, and he reveled in the similarities between vestments and drag. Rose accepts in the spirit of the Renaissance pope who said, "God has given Us the papacy; let Us enjoy it." He enjoys interior decorating and costuming, getting revenge on Rolfe's enemies and creditors, and even making some changes that the real church eventually took up (canonizing Joan of Arc). The book was made into a Broadway play and is lots of fun.

## Recent Reading

Like most teenagers, I thought of the musical generation before my adolescence as dull, respectable, grown-up oppressor music, and when its fans told me that the stuff I listened to was just noise, I would remind them of silly songs from their day, and point out that some of the people whose songs I listened to (Chuck Berry and Lieber/Stoller, later Dylan and Lennon/McCartney) flung words with some skill. I later read an article by Robertson Davies from before I was born defending the music that I considered respectable against its predecessors. Thus in every generation, world without end. I at least remember this process, as many middle-aged people do not. I am sure that some hip-hop really is repetitious, offensive noise, and some is witty demotic poetry in the tradition of "The Signifyin' Monkey" and "Shine and the *Titanic*," though you couldn't get me to listen to anywhere near enough of it to tell you which is which.

Anyway, I have now read *Portrait of Johnny*, Gene Lees's bio of Johnny Mercer, a songwriter from the generation before mine, and Mercer did write some good stuff: "That Old Black Magic," "Fools Rush In," and "Baby, It's Cold Outside," as well as the songs from the delightful Broadway version of *Li'l Abner*, just to name a few. Unfortunately, the book is

something of a hodge-podge, with long tangential stories and Mercer's own attempts at a memoir (good thing he kept his day job), but Mercer himself shines through.

Americans need to know more about Islam, and one good place to start is *No god but God*, by Reza Aslan. Aslan traces the history of Islam back through Muhammad and the caliphs, up to the present. I found his discussion of Sufism particularly fascinating. The book has an agenda, and I would not be surprised if Aslan has managed to mention every bit of democracy, equality, and feminism in the Koran and the *hadith*, but it is well to remember that a religion is a large and complex entity, and everything he mentions is really there, along with the wretched excesses that their analogs of Pat Robertson and James Dobson proudly proclaim.

*John Kenneth Galbraith*, by Richard Parker, is a long book about a tall man who's been around a long time. Galbraith was born in Canada more than ninety years ago. He moved down here to teach agricultural economics, first at Berkeley, then at Harvard, but soon branched out. He set prices for FDR in World War II, served as ambassador to India in the Kennedy administration, and suffered the wrath of some colleagues because he wrote economics books without equations and graphs. (Economics is the most mathematically complex of the social sciences, with the possible exception of astrology.) He was and is (cover your ears, Ms. Coulter) a liberal, somewhat to the left of President Eisenhower and far to the left of both parties today, and I must admit I mostly agree with his political approach. He also has always written skillfully and wittily. Parker captures much of his essence.

My first favorite actor was Alec Guinness, whom I loved in funny movies such as *The Man in the White Suit*, *The Lavender Hill Mob*, and *Kind Hearts and Coronets* when I was a child. He went on to win the Oscar for his role in *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, and make a pile of money for playing Obi-Wan Kenobi. After his death, his family commissioned an authorized biography by Piers Paul Read. Read's *Alec Guinness* is a complex person, worried that there's no person beneath his acting masks, loving his wife but being far

more homosexual in orientation, and eventually writing charming if evasive memoirs and published diaries.

*February House*, by Sherrill Tippins, chronicles a remarkable non-sf slant shack in Brooklyn during the early 40s. It was put together by a charming rogue named George Davis, who edited the serious literature in women's magazines when that was not a contradiction in terms. Carson McCullers did some of her best work there, while falling in love with women and men. W.H. Auden brought a surprising amount of organization to the place while continuing to write poetry and criticism. Jane and Paul Bowles were in residence for a while, but didn't really fit. Gypsy Rose Lee, the stripper, moved in to write a mystery, *The G-String Murders*, with much help from Davis. Like all slant shacks, it didn't last, but it was more successful than most.

It's been said that the smaller the stakes, the more vicious the competition. *DisneyWar*, by James B. Stewart, offers a counterexample. Michael Eisner, the CEO of the Disney entertainment empire, would no sooner promote a new man to a position near the top than he would decide that the man was now a dangerous rival and begin trying to destroy him. For some reason, the company did not prosper under this sort of enlightened leadership. Of course when a corporation gets as big as Disney, its rivals, its creditors, and the government will try to prop it up when it fails, but Eisner & Co. managed to lose much of that advantage. The tale of this disaster is fun, though probably of an unedifying sort.

Marjorie Garber is one of those notorious postmodernists. She has written books about transvestism and bisexuality, her essays are sometimes jargonific, and one of her books, *Academic Instincts*, has as its cover Raphael's *School of Athens* with herself and her two pet dogs inserted front and center. For many years she has taught Shakespeare at Harvard, and of course he wrote so many plays where female characters played by boys (as they all were in those days) disguised themselves as boys, and much merriment ensued therefrom, that one who didn't like her sexually curious books might maintain that Shakespeare, rather than Derrida or someone like that, led her astray. In

any event, she has now written *Shakespeare after All*, a long book discussing all of the plays.

One common image of postmodernists is that they find some political or sexual meaning in a work of art and then beat on that, ignoring more esthetically interesting aspects. That is not at all what Garber does; she takes the approach that a work means all that it can. *The Tempest* is about colonialism, but it is also about the artist in exile, about Shakespeare himself near the end of his career, about betrayal and forgiveness, and about itself—no one answer is the Right One. This book has greatly increased my understanding of and love for Shakespeare.

### **10 things normal people have done that I haven't**

1. Had my tonsils removed.
2. Watched an entire *Cheers*, *Seinfeld*, or *Buffy* episode.
3. Gone out on a date while in high school.
4. Heard anything by Nirvana (or many other performers of the last 30 years).
5. Bet more than \$10 on anything.
6. Ridden a bicycle.
7. Learned to play a musical instrument.
8. Read any of the Narnia books.
9. Cooked an egg.
10. Had to read *Silas Marner*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, or *Lord of the Flies*.

Science may soon be able to put a camera inside a pill, which would then send out pictures of the intestinal tract. When it is perfected, one might send a note of it to that special person on the net who no longer needs to have his head up his ass.

At long last, the Star Wars epic concludes *in medias res* with *Revenge of the Anagram*. That genius for names that Lucas first showed with Princess Leia is unflagging; we should be grateful the series ended before we got General Pustulent and Darth Smegma. You couldn't prove it by me, but there are alleged to be inconsistencies between Princess Leia's memories in the first (now fourth) picture and the conclusion of this one, but, hey, that was many parsecs earlier.

In case you were wondering, let me inform you that I am cisgendered.

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## Not forgotten

More than fifty years ago, Bertrand Russell said, "I fear that the next war will be between Moscow and the Vatican. I shall reluctantly side with the Vatican." It is possible that he was right, and that his side won, but the whole thing was carried out covertly.

If we can look forward to a time when Communism oppresses nothing larger than a university lit department, **John Paul II** deserves much of the credit, more so than Ronald Reagan, who did a few things right (like not listening to Dick Cheney) but was mainly lucky. The late pope was brave, honest, and intelligent.

But of course Russia's wasn't the only Evil Empire, and JP2, for all his admirable personal qualities, made his own empire significantly more evil, strengthening his own power and that of his office at the expense of the people, and particularly half of those. Mostly thanks to him, his church is standing fast in its efforts to assure that while men can be many things, women are first, last, and foremost ambulatory wombs. He was a celibate old man atop a pyramid of celibate old men, so removed from the realities of sex that they could not distinguish between a loving relationship of two people who happen to have the same sort of genitalia and one of their own inflicting sexual pain and terror on a child by implicitly or explicitly threatening the greater horrors of Hell.

In 1970 I was just beginning to notice that one of my favorite things—science fiction—had some sort of weird subculture attached to it, encouraging it or sucking the life out of it or something. Thanks to an Algis Budrys review in *Galaxy*, I mail-ordered a book called *The Double-Bill Symposium*, a collection of answers by sf writers to questions about how they wrote, that had come from the weird thing called fandom. I was fascinated by the book, and a couple of years later, I heard that one of its editors, **Bill Bowers**, was doing one of those fanzines, so I sent him a buck for it.

It was all good, but I particularly liked the letter column, which I immediately joined in on. It was a step along the way to doing my own zine, which in turn led to getting back to things like friendship and sex, and eventually meeting Bernadette. I got to know Bill, through the zine and eventually in person, and liked

him a whole bunch; he was a sweet, caring person, as well as a guy who put out a delightful zine.

About 20 years ago, the world began whapping him upside the head every so often, just to remind him he was alive—health, money, and so on. The job has now been finished off. Ole-fashioned fanzine fandom is poorer without Bill. So are we all.

**Johnnie Cochran** played the race card when it would almost have been malpractice for him not to. He played it skillfully.

Medical science, which gave up on sf author and all-around mensch **Warren Norwood** in 1988, was finally proven right.

**Evan Hunter** has died. Perhaps some people are sadder to learn that **Ed McBain** also died. Hunter wrote mainstream fiction under his own name and the 87th Precinct police procedurals as McBain. It may have been *Hail to the Chief*, a 1973 87th Precinct book featuring a gang leader who resembled Richard Nixon, that started the idea that McBain was a better and more interesting writer than Hunter, which is now a commonplace. (Chester Himes had a similar problem, though he wrote his Coffin Ed Johnson & Grave Digger Jones police books under his own name.)

**Hank Stram** was a brilliantly innovative NFL coach. Even better: He came into pro football when there was a "gentlemen's agreement" not to put too many black guys on the field at once, and he prospered by not being a gentleman.

Randomly chosen Londoners were blown up by the forces of mindless evil, and the rest of the city reacted with an admirable lack of panic. Again.

Also: **Art Rapp**, old-time fanzine fan I enjoyed reading in FAPA and APA-69; **Saul Bellow**, important mainstream writer; **Byron Preiss** of *ibooks*, which reprinted much good sf; **Rainier III**, prince of Monaco; and the empty shell that had once housed **Terri Schiavo**.

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Excelsior,

*Arthur*