

# NICE DISTINCTIONS 1

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In general it's all gotten worse since a minority of the voters, a majority of the Supreme Court, a gang of imported thugs, and Ralph Nader made Bush our Head Honky In Charge, but around here things are going pretty well, including my health. At Bernadette's insistence, I went for a colonoscopy. Beforehand, we asked a fortune cookie about it. The reply: "Look up an old friend." The last time I tried that (15 years ago), they sedated me insufficiently, and I screamed in pain and terror until they gave up. This time they put me out 100%, and all they found was one benign polyp. I also had a blood workup, which, like the famous x-ray of Dizzy Dean's head, found nothing. I have, however, been hit with the one-two punch of contemporary nutritional correctness: more fiber and less cholesterol. So I've started eating a bowl of Fiber One cereal each morning and stopped eating cheese (not that I mind being a surrender monkey). Bernadette has warned that perhaps this is only the beginning, and I will have to move up to Fiber Two, or eventually something like Fiber Ten, which is equivalent to gnawing down trees. I hope that's a sufficient concession and I needn't exercise.

The big new thing in my life is livejournal, which is the best parts of an apa, a blog, and a newsgroup or mailing list. I'm at

<<http://www.livejournal.com/users/supergee/>>

It's inspiring me to write more; in fact, much of what you will see here started there.

I bought a new printer. I was going to get the same kind Kevin has, but his turns out to be ancient, obsolete, perhaps even premillennial. So I got a Higher Power 3820 for \$100 (the free cartridges would cost more than half of that). It's faster than the old one, you can put in more paper at once, womzilla fixed it so it prints last page first, and it doesn't make

noises that unpleasantly remind me of my respiratory system.

There was one problem: While it prints, it shows how much toner is supposed to be left, and that declined precipitously. A month later, it said that it was desperately low on toner, even though I wasn't using it any more than I had used the other one. After two months it warned me every time I printed something, but still printed nice and dark in draft mode. Two weeks later, I changed cartridges, though I could have waited longer. I wish I didn't believe that the indicator is set that way to get people to buy toner they don't need.

## **Beyond This Verizon**

As part of my crawl into the latter half of the twentieth century, I have purchased a cell phone. One of the many ways Bernadette has corrupted me is that I give names to machines and objects. (My computer is named Peter Celeron after his processor.) The cell phone is a Sprint, so I named it Bullet Bob after Bob Hayes, the great 60s sprinter.

Maybe it's time to institute a new award for institutional efforts to "protect our troops" by suppressing questions about the wisdom of our military policy. We can call it

### **The Liberty Cabbage Award**

Obvious winners are the House cafeteria switching to "freedom fries," which inspired the name of the award; Clear Channel blacklisting the Dixie Chicks; and the Hall of Fame canceling the showing of *Bull Durham* lest the stars speaks their minds at it. (For the latter I have doomed dreams of the pig named Pete Rose getting up and slowly walking away.)

I was going to refrain from writing about the war proper and stick to civil liberties stuff at home, but that was before the number of

troops our Secretary of Defense considered sufficient couldn't protect the hospitals and the heritage of 6,000 years in the museums. Donald REMFsfeld, may it be on your head.

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Two of my favorite novels are back in print: *Auntie Mame* and *Little Me*. Both are by Patrick Dennis, the author of about a dozen other comic novels. In my twenties he was one of my favorite sources of comfort reading.

I love his prose. In *Auntie Mame* he encounters a Southern matriarch whose favorite conversational topics are the fox hunt and her own digestive difficulties, or as he says, "tales of field and flatulence." He describes a (fictitious) smart-ass WWII memoir entitled *Around the World in a GI Bra* as "a toxic little jollification." His books were cleverly plotted and featured nice people, and good eventually triumphed. Most of the books were social comedies, and I preferred his flavor to the more popular P.G. Wodehouse.

*Auntie Mame* is about the kind of older relative we all wish we had. There was also a hilarious illustrated novel called *Little Me*, a supposed Hollywood autobiography with perhaps the most unreliable narrator ever. The imagined Belle Poitrine was a liar, a thief, a bigot, and a whore, and nowhere near smart enough to successfully conceal any of these traits in telling her story. I laughed at the incompetent lies, the grotesque situations, and the characters with names like Letch Feeley.

Years later, I began hearing that *Little Me* was an excellent example of High Camp, of a gay sensibility mocking our heterosexual culture. I didn't know that when the book ~~came out~~ was published, and it may be that the author didn't either, or at least wasn't sure.

Eric Myers has written *Uncle Mame*, the life story of Edward Everett Tanner III, who wrote as Patrick Dennis. He informs us that Dennis married in the late 1940s, fathered two children, and loved his wife, but apparently had other urges, which in the Fifties he satisfied at New York's Luxor Baths. (Myers informs us that in those days the suggestively named Everard Baths were almost exclusively patronized by those seeking male-male contact, but the Luxor also fulfilled its ostensible function.)

Eventually (somewhere around the time of the publication of *Little Me*) Dennis fell in love with a man he'd met at the Luxor, one Guy Kent, whom his friends found unsuitable even if they did not disapprove of the same-sex aspect. So he left his wife to run off to Tangier with Guy, only to find that Guy double-crossed him, finding a woman to live off of. Dennis took *Novelist's Revenge*, in a book called *Tony*, with suitable gender transformations.

Dennis's life wound up imitating Richard Condon's art, as he eventually became a butler to various rich persons, including McDonald's founder Ray Kroc. He returned to his wife, found he had terminal cancer, and died in the '70s.

Of course the culture didn't help his sexual confusion. It was around this time that literary scholar Newton Arvin was arrested and had his life ruined because he owned "homosexual pornography"—pictures of attractive men in outfits that could now be worn on any beach. Straight and gay then seemed so opposite that most people couldn't imagine going from one to the other, except possibly under a full moon.

Some say that Dennis's orientation can be deduced from his fiction, that Belle Poitrine was such an over-the-top, parodic excess of femaleness that she must have been created by a gay man. I didn't notice that at the time, and I still have my doubts. I am also told that Mae West was such an excess in real life, particularly in her blatant proclamation of impersonal lust, to the point where she appealed to gays, rather than hets.

Fanzine fandom has long known a counterexample to the vulgar belief that one can determine a man's sexual orientation from his taste in actresses: Roy Tackett is a hardcore Judy Garland fan. And my father, who was at least as heterosexual as I am, was a great Mae West fan. He saw her as representing a form of female sexuality, rather than a parody thereof. And I wouldn't be at all surprised if this were a good sign about him. A while back we were hearing about those men who were rendered impotent by women who were too openly desirous of sex. Deprived of the conqueror/seducer role, these guys could not perform. I have not had that particular problem. Could this have something to do with not seeing someone like Mae West as a parody? I will admit, in fact, that I

am greatly attracted to the two similarly excessive heiresses to the Mae West tradition, Dolly Parton and Bette Midler. (The fact that all three have/had a sense of humor about themselves helps.)

Besides, much of the idea that West was an excessive parody of sexuality comes from her continuing her act into her later years. There is a typically barbarous element in our primitive culture that treats female sexual desire as laughable and/or pathetic any time the woman is noticeably too old for bimbo status. (Would a civilized society see a successful middle-aged woman with a toy boy as any less enviable than a middle-aged man with a trophy girl?)

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I'm in favor of banning ambient music from stores and such. This is partly because of my hearing problems, which make it hard to pick out speech directed at me from the musical background and partly because I'm getting Old & Cranky enough that I divide music into comfort music and turn-that-crap-OFF! I'm also against social gatherings where they have background music to help people meet & greet, which is like helping people enjoy an art museum by shining lights in their eyes.

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I read all the Fu Manchu books in the mid-60s, and wondered if the good doctor was then operating under the name of Ho Chi Minh. The books had all the excesses of their times—a Jewish character was described as “shrewd and avaricious, like all of his race”—but were fun, and at the end, Nayland Smith realized that he'd be just another retired civil servant if it weren't for Uncle Fu.

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I know that a life of total nonentanglement would be at a form of death. John Donne tells me I'm not an island, and he's right, but I would like to be a peninsula. Perhaps this penisolate desire makes me a prick, but I draw circles of Us (my family, lj friends, rasff, fanzine fandom, people with symbol-using intelligence). Those outside are human, and not to be harmed, but their interests are not mine. Insofar as I can overcome my cultural programming, I do not treat “males” or “white people” as a circle of Us. I try to have a big

circle of all of *Homo sapiens*, but that is not as binding to me as the littler ones.

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Science-fiction fandom makes it possible to have long-term friendships with people one has never been in the same room with. Mine with Bruce Gillespie has lasted over a quarter of a century. The friendship has been renewed by the arrival of the 78th issue of *SF Commentary*, an 80-page zine (on large Australian-size paper) that discusses sf as well as it is discussed anywhere. Highlights include a John Crowley article on Thomas Disch's gothic novels (from *Yale Review*) and discussions of the two Australians who are doing some of the most fascinating work in the field today, Greg Egan and Damien Broderick.

The zine is available by subscription from Bruce Gillespie, 59 Keele St. Collingwood, Vic. 3066 Australia. Within Australia, five issues cost \$35 in the local currency; cheques to Gillespie & Cochrane Pty Ltd. Outside a sub is \$30 American or £15 UK. (Please send cash.)

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They say that High Culture is the ability to hear “The William Tell Overture” without thinking of the Lone Ranger. Not only can I not do that, but whenever I encounter the name *Rochester* in a literary discussion (the character or the poet), I hear it in Jack Benny's voice.

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### **Columbia**

They died for us, and for the hope that some day we won't be ever-increasing billions trapped together in a cruddy little gravity well.

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### **Just Two Kinds of People in the World**

Richard Goldstein's new book is about Andrew Sullivan and Camille Paglia, whom he calls *The Attack Queers*. He's right about a lot of it, such as Sullivan's need for respectability, which leads him to say not only that gays should have proper monogamous sex lives like normal people but that all gay men should be really really masculine. (Those infamous Web ads he ran under the name of RawMuscleGlutes said: (1) he was manly as can be, and (2) he wanted to be the concave

one.) Paglia wishes to be outrageous, but likewise speaks up for what she considers the masculine virtues.

What I like less is Goldstein's attempt to force sexual politics into the collectivist class paradigm. At one point, he says, "Progressives stand for the rise of groups; conservatives for the formation of elites." Just two kinds of people in the world, and if you're not a collectivist, you're a conservative.

One thing that unites Sullivan and Goldstein is that neither wants to talk about bisexuality. For Sullivan it's impossible because gays are fixed in their identity and can never be forced to cross the chasm between the two. For Goldstein one cannot be simultaneously straight and gay any more than one could be simultaneously bourgeois and proletarian. And both need to be reminded that when the facts don't fit the theory, you change the theory.

(Which reminds me that I like and respect Jonathan Rauch, who has managed to be a gay liberal in the face of the demand that gays be radicals or conservatives, just as John McWhorter manages to be a Black liberal. Rauch also did a marvelous article on introversion in the *Atlantic*. Extreme introverts—I'm one—see social relations as taking energy from them, while extraverts gain energy from such. It is not necessarily a favor to get someone to mingle and do small talk.)

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I never found fashionability a desirable quality in women, and I never felt particularly weird about being that way. In any crowd I ever hung out with, there were a significant number of guys who thought that fashion was a shuck to sell clothes and that the only change it made in a woman was to raise the cost of upkeep (not the sort of thing I ever wanted to show off). In retrospect, I think we placed too much blame on alleged Homintern control of the fashion biz.

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*The New York Times* had a recent article about people hacking online games, finding flaws in the programming that enable them to win by Not Playing the Game. (There's one where you can win by shooting through the trees.) This seems puzzling on the face of it, since this is done in games with no external reward, but apparently, for these people,

finding tricks like that *is* the game. Sometimes I think we were all supposed to be playing *Labor in the Sweat of Thy Brow*, but some sly hackers came up with cheats like science and technology.

(Avram Grumer pointed out that *Labor in the Sweat of Thy Brow* was the hack that let people win at *Just Try to Breed Before You Die*. Some of those old games go way back.)

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One problem with being an elitist (I've been one all my life, so I'm used to it) is that people I like and respect will hear one of my diatribes against the Great Unwashed, and assume that I am including them. I think that this comes from a low self-image and being used to being the target of negativity. Football player Steve Wright said in his autobio that he got to the point that when someone said "turd," he would say, "Yeah, what do you want?" This negative reaction seems more likely to come from women than men.

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I think of both nations and money as works of the imagination. Like all really successful works of the imagination, they have become that which doesn't go away when you stop believing in it.

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## Books

Almost 50 years ago, William Gaddis wrote a great novel called *The Recognitions*. It was long, complex, and allusive. I found it readable and enjoyable (though I'm sure I missed things), but America's book reviewers treated it as if it were *Finnegans Wake*. His later books were even longer and more complex. Gaddis died in 1998, and it was reported that he had left behind a book with the puzzling title of *Agape Agape*, which was either a final novel or his long-promised history of the player piano.

Now we know. The book is actually called *Agapē Agape*, so unselfish love precedes openness, and it is a novella, a first-person terminal monologue of a man who wrote difficult books and spent his life trying to write a history of the player piano. (The unnamed protagonist has three daughters, which does not appear to point us to King

Lear, but points us away from the historical William Gaddis, who had a daughter and a son. Few other specificities are given.)

It is marvelous. It is brief, yet complex and allusive. Player piano, art in the age of mechanical reproduction, the binary all-or-nothing of computers, Vaucanson's duck, Thomas Pynchon having the nerve to write books that are hard to understand, Huizinga and the function of play, prednisone...and through it all a richly described human being finding what to hang on to as the body goes. (An afterword by Joseph Tabbi explains some of the parts I missed, such as Thomas Bernhard.)

Orson Scott Card has said that the only pleasure people can get out of a book like *Ulysses* is "decoding." That never seemed right, and now I have a better idea of what's missing: Part of what I love about this one is the way it fits into the complex, partially forgotten universe of my previous reading, with earlier Gaddis and Tolstoy and Melville and Hugh Kenner and more. I feel sorry for anyone who isn't working on a building of that sort.

I intend to reread this book at least once in every year that is left to me.

A couple of years ago, Louis Menand wrote a marvelous history of American pragmatism: *The Metaphysical Club*. His new book is a selection of his essays, called *American Studies*, which I also recommend. Highlights: discussions of T.S. Eliot's antisemitism, Norman Mailer as an excellent writer who never got out of the 50s, and Larry Flynt and Jerry Falwell as two sides of the same coin.

Ed McBain's *Fat Ollie's Book* is the best 87th Precinct book in years. Ollie Weeks is a good cop and bad person, and in this one he has written a hilariously inept police novel, quoted at length. It is stolen by someone who believes it is police nonfiction. This one is fun.

*Harmful to Children*, by Judith Levine, contains substantial doses of intelligence and reason in an area many people consider far too serious to think clearly about. The author points how the increase in the protection of children (including teenagers) from anything resembling sex has paralleled the decrease in protection of children from hunger, homelessness, and lack of medical care. She also

notes that some of the rules make children even more vulnerable to rape, disease, and other sexual things that sane people are concerned with. Needless to say, this book could not find a commercial publisher, and now that the University of Minnesota has published it, the Right is treating it like a snuff movie.

I am not terribly good at picking up information visually, and my mother told me that was a virtue, keeping me away from the less intellectual art forms such as comics and movies. She was not entirely mistaken, in that the lowest common denominator for those is even lower than for text, but I admit that there's much in comics and movies that I just don't get.

So the first British Film Institute book I have looked at is the 68th in the series—Greil Marcus on *The Manchurian Candidate*—and I liked the movie because it is a faithful version of the book. (Condon was well served by Hollywood; *Winter Kills* and *Prizzi's Honor* likewise brought complex plots to the screen with relatively little loss.) Marcus wrongly belittles the book, but he makes some good points about the movie, including that this may have been Frank Sinatra's greatest acting performance, back when he still could be a convincing moral center (it was not yet general knowledge that his Mafia connections had caused the Kennedy administration to distance itself from him), and that casting Laurence Harvey as a brainwashed zombie was a stroke of genius.

Elevator inspectors are at the center of civilization. Among them there is a struggle between the Empiricists and the Intuitionists, and the first black female elevator inspector, an Intuitionist, has to find out if there is an Empiricist plot.

Maybe I'm weird (*Maybe?*), but a plot summary like that says "Read me. Now." The book in question is *The Intuitionist*, by Colson Whitehead, and it lives up to that summary. One highlight is the marvelous use of empiricist/intuitionist, black/white, and vertical/horizontal oppositions.

I somehow got the impression that Anthony Burgess had gone into a slump after *Earthly Powers* (he'd been in one before), and I didn't read his later books as they came out. I

recently decided to test the hypothesis, and it was wrong. *Any Old Iron* had the kind of excellent characterization and Joycean word-play I had come to expect, but its central theme did not get to me, perhaps because one major element of it is that famous Matter that I have never been able to take quite seriously because its protagonist shares my name. (My childhood dog was named Merlin.) *The Pianoplayers*, on the other hand, is delightful, a paean to musical and other skills narrated by a retired courtesan with much of her creator's biography (father comes home from WWI to find offspring the only flu survivor in the house). The funniest part is the scene where the father is fired for the musical accompaniment he gives a silent film of the life of Jesus.

## Updates

Reen Brust pointed out that *crone* is a term of art in some religions, so I'm not going to claim to be one. I'm going to call myself a *codger*. Webster thinks the word comes from *cadger*, but isn't sure, so I'm going to insist that it's short for *cogitator*.

I probably was too rough on Lou Reed last time; he is not really all that is ugly and evil in postmusic. I do wish he'd sung "Walk on the Wild Side" instead of sneeringly reciting it.

## Our Title

In the 18th century, a *nice distinction* meant a precise one, a goal I have aimed for. See:

<http://www.abc.net.au/classic/breakfast/stories/s698787.htm>

I have come to believe that drawing distinctions is *the* crucial activity of the human mind and that all distinctions are drawn. That is, it is meaningless to speak of comparing our map of the real world to the world because all we perceive is our map, made by sensory organs that are known to distort. We can draw exact distinctions (chemical elements), good approximate distinctions (sex), and ones so messy they aren't worth trying (race), but we are always drawing distinctions ourselves. (My philosophy is a sloppy syncretism of Popper, Korzybski, Watzlawick, Kuhn, Bateson, Laqueur, and others.)

The cited site mentions the many meanings *nice* has had, including *foolish*,

*wanton, lascivious, showy, effeminate, unmanly, fastidious, appetizing, and dainty*. Now it is a bad thing, the evil opposite of *direct, confrontational*, and other manly virtues. I agree, however, with Miss Manners, who emphasizes the importance of structures that keep us from expressing how we really feel.

## Nasty, Brutish, & Short

I believe that a color-blind society would have proportionally more black professors than white cornerbacks.

My favorite computer-banned word is "Brightwater." I used to think that computers would never be able to beat a world chess champion or find a dirty meaning I missed.

I do the Windows prophylaxis, shutting down every night and booting up every morning, and I remember how the computers were going to turn everything else on and off for us.

Picking up the cleverly disguised object, Inspector Magritte remarked, *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*.

"Give me your arguments for trusting whatever Bush says."  
"Go fisk."

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This issue is dedicated to Bernice Sackson and Sally Syrjala, who lost beloved husbands.

### N3F SHORT STORY CONTEST—2003

The National Fantasy Fan Federation was formed over fifty years ago as a place for fans of all interests to come together.

It is a particularly good place for those new to fandom to learn about fandom's many avenues.

The short story contest is a place where fledging authors can submit their work and receive valuable feedback on it.

There is a \$2 entry fee per submission. Cash awards in the amount of \$50 for first place, \$30 for second place and \$20 for third place will be awarded.

Questions and submissions are to be made to:

Elizabeth Caldwell  
685 South Zeeb Road  
Ann Arbor, MI 48103-9332  
sales@pencentral.net

Please query Elizabeth for information on required formatting.

This year's deadline is December 1, 2003. Announcements and notifications of winning entries will be made in January of 2004.

Recommended reading is *Elements of Style* by Strunk and White. It is also suggested that someone else go over the entry before it is submitted.