

# Nice Distinctions II

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## Genesis projective test

Which of these characters do you identify with?

**God** I knew they'd eat the apple. (Of course I knew it; I'm omniscient.) Give people rules and they disobey them. They'll be sorry.

**Eve** I think I'm glad I have the knowledge of good and evil. It makes the world more interesting, but also more scary. I just wish I knew whether what I did was good or evil.

**Adam** The bitch set me up. It's all her fault. Now that I know what evil is, I know that women are capable of it, so I don't trust them. Or the part of me that keeps pointing to them.

**The tree** I endure. If I am cut down, I will grow again. I have no ego. I am in total harmony with the environment. How awful it must be to be separate, to want the thing that is not.

**The apple** I am desirable and destructive. What fun!

**Lilith** I'm glad I ate the apple. Now I have a human mind; I can draw distinctions. I could not imagine science and art before this. Of course, Himself kept nagging me

to seduce Adam into eating, too, but I couldn't see any point to sentient males. Finally, He kicked me out and rung in that bimbo, and I'm sure they'll try to write me out of the story.

**The serpent** That was fun, and now the humans are far more interesting. I'll check back in a while to see how they've done, and give them another hint. They'll probably crucify me.

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## New computer

Thanks to heroic efforts by Kevin, I am now using my new computer, Hypatia. I gave her that name because she's an HP; my printer, from the same company, is already named Harriet Potter. The historical Hypatia was a brilliant philosopher and mathematician who appeared around the time of the switch from Pagans oppressing Christians to Christians oppressing Pagans, and she was one of the early victims of the latter, though there were intelligent Christians who understood her and tried to save her. "Hypatia" is also the name of an intelligent computer in Frederik Pohl's Gateway books. My machine's full name is Hypatia Dax, because she contains the memories of her predecessors. My old computer, Peter Celeron, had served valiantly, but was four years old, which is even older in computer years than I am in people years.

I feel as if I've moved into the third millennium. Everything works faster—no waiting while a file is checked for viruses, for instance; it does that at, dare I say, computer speed. I don't have to turn the machine off every night and on every morning. (I was told that my first computer would be programmable to turn everything else on and off, so that constraint seemed like a major regression.)

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Extremist cleric Pat Robertson issued a *fatwa* against Hugo Chávez, the president of Venezuela, but withdrew it under pressure.

## From a Safe Distance

There was a hurricane, and the Bush administration, as usual, acted as if it had been dreamed up by heavy-handed satirists. The political appointee in charge, given the position because he had proven himself incapable of running a show-horse organization, didn't seem to notice the problem until the media screamed at him. The president, unconvinced that the hurricane was as important as keeping a brain-dead woman "alive," sauntered back from his latest vacation to do photo-ops and emit pious nullities. Fortunately, there were better people on the scene.

And the greatest is charity,  
To be found among those who have not  
observed the regulations—Ezra Pound

All honor to Jabbar Gibson, who took an idle New Orleans school bus full of poor and sick people to Houston. I don't know what's America's highest honor for civilian heroism, but he deserves it.

Perhaps needing to be reminded that FEMA did not invent institutional stupidity, Bernadette and I went to the Post Office to send some packages to New Orleans. Three packages went out OK, but we were informed that the fourth, a mercy package to the LSU Vet School, could not go through in the box we had found for it (which had once held a monitor) because it had words on it (none that offered conflicting addresses), but had to be put in a plain brown wrapper.

Having bulk-mailed my zine for several years, I know that the firm, immutable, universal policy of the PO varies sharply with which post office one mails from, and even which clerk one sees, so that could be an official Postal Service stupidity, or it could be the person we dealt with setting up as a Freelance Hemorrhoid. Anyway, I went to Staples, where the only plain brown wrapping paper available was the kind that is used to cushion packages. We put a layer of that on, and then the clerk

told us that the package was so large it would cost an additional \$60 to mail, perhaps because of the additional padding.

So we gave up and I took it to UPS, where they didn't care about the words on the package, considered it the right size, and sent the thing for a Discordian \$23.23.

In retrospect it had the terrible inevitability of a syllogism. The Bush gang had made it clear all along that they hated, feared, and distrusted government, except for defense matters. Suddenly faced with what many of us would consider a legitimate function of government, minimizing suffering in the wake of a natural disaster, they proved no better than their theories predicted they would be.

The combination of indifference and incompetence Bushco showed after Katrina is one factor in the precipitous decline of Bush's popularity, along with the disastrous war they lied us into, the collapse of the economy under the program of making the rich richer, and the connivance of government officials in revealing the identity of an American agent (a crime that is about to bring indictments as I write). I would like to believe that ours is still more Jabbar Gibson's country than George Bush's, full of people who believe they have a duty to relieve the suffering of others, rather than winners in a fixed war of all against all.

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## livejournal

I continue to enjoy that alleged hangout of high-emotion, low-intellect teenagers, in which my name is **supergee**. Good people hang out there, and I even enjoy some of the quizzes and such. For instance, there was one that asks, "Which trickster are you?" I got one I didn't like, so I simply cut and pasted one where the answer was Coyote from someone else's lj. I think that was very much in His spirit.

A randomly generated list of my live-journal interests and why:

**Charles Addams:** Great sick humor and the inspiration for one of the few sitcoms where Mommy & Daddy liked each other, and neither was a dummy.

**Donald E. Westlake:** Author of some amazingly funny stuff. My favorite is *Dancing Aztecs*.

**Frederik Pohl:** Exemplar of the satirical social sf of the 50s. And still going.

**Infinity:** We all contain it, as explained in Rudy Rucker's *Infinity and the Mind*.

**Ken MacLeod:** Great poli-sci-fi writer.

**Mathematics:** The protocols of the Elder Gods. For real.

**Peter Straub:** Along with Gene Wolfe, a writer who scores high on trad-lit values, as well as genre values. And actually fun to read.

**Robert Silverberg:** Maybe no sf writer has written both more and better.

**Swarthmore:** The genuinely elitist (smart, not rich) hideaway from real life. Angels armed with the Flaming Sword of Graduation expelled me more than 40 years ago.

**Wile E. Coyote:** The God For a Time When Nothing Works Right™.

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Rush Limbaugh informs us, if that is the word I am looking for, that Hillary Clinton threatened to have Cindy Sheehan killed, just like she had Vince Foster killed, if Sheehan mentions her name again. Don't you wish *you* lived in an exciting world like that?

### **Another one bites the dust**

Myriad, a science-fiction amateur press association (apa), is calling it quits after its 235th mailing. I loved apas and used to be in a dozen of them at a time, but lj and other online venues have killed the apa; several others have called it quits in recent years. I didn't spend much time there, but I enjoyed it.

I know I'm a part and product of a lot of things before and around me. We're all

living off the folks who figured out fire and the wheel, and I try to be grateful.

### **Performatives**

Oxford philosopher J.L. Austin wrote *How to Do Things with Words*, about how words can be used to perform acts ("I promise," "With this ring I thee wed"), as well as make statements. He thus started a whole school known as speech-act theory, one that I warily endorse. For instance, I suspect that all or most statements of the form "X is a [noun]" or "X is [adjective]" can be seen as overt or covert accusations, identifications, and other acts. On the other hand, the approach can be used to treat speech one doesn't like (pornography, sedition) as acts, and thus easier to ban.

(One way of dealing with labels and two-valued terms is to insist that, as such terms are based on continuous variables, fractions and decimals can be used. For instance, I consider myself approximately 90% heterosexual. Another term that it is considered absolute, though there are conflicting definitions that mark different membership sets, is "Jewish." I am half Jewish. Ethnically, I am Jewish on my mother's side (like Jesus). I am culturally Jewish (but so, to some extent, is everyone who grew up in the New York area). I am Jewish in the sense that I would expect any competently organized pogrom in my vicinity to include me. I am, on the other hand, not Jewish by religious affiliation, and I am *definitely* not Orthodox or Conservative Jewish by belief (which to some means that I am not really Jewish). I average out all these data and approximate the answer with a statement that I am half Jewish, and I insist that is a meaningful concept, since it accurately describes me.)

An lj post and its discussion remind me that the verb *love* is sometimes considered a performative. "I love you" can be considered a statement about my feelings or a performative, a vow to behave in ways consistent with the ways that feeling is

supposed to manifest. Again, I am a bit wary. “If you *really* loved me, you wouldn’t...” makes a lot more sense to me if it is followed by “hit me,” rather than “ever look at another man,” but I have trouble defining the difference.

### **How old are the bits of my life?**

My high school diploma is 45, and thinks the music the kids listen to is just noise.

My undergraduate degree is 41, and if it takes after me, it has recently moved out of its parents’ house.

My graduate degree is 15. It listens to the noise.

My zine is in its prime, at 28.

My relationship with Bernadette is a young adult: 24, or 23 if you define by living together.

Our relationship with Kevin is just able to vote, or just barely teenage if you define by living together.

Ann Coulter was caught stealing material from other theocons. Earlier this year, Rep. Jim Gibbons (R-NV) was sued for using someone else’s antiliberal harangue without credit. Because I’m a liberal, I’m going to let them off easy and blame the culture that produced them. It’s not their fault they come from an oral culture.

In *Orality and Literacy* Walter J. Ong noted that the bards who recited epics such as the *Odyssey* could not have memorized them, but were able to recreate them by knowing the main story and applying certain traditional epithets, such as *wine-dark sea* and *rosy-fingered dawn*. Likewise, the theocons. They have a story: George, son of George, smites the evil-doers. They have standard epithets: *tree hugger*, *baby killer*.... Sometimes two of them will tell the story so similarly that the versions sound alike. (This is sometimes known as *staying on message*.) We should understand what they’re doing and not condemn them for failing to meet the harsher standards imposed on the literate.

I have finished and submitted my encyclopedia articles on Adam Osborne and Reggie White. I must say that the way my professional writing feels to me is well described by the Rude Pundit’s favorite scatological verb—to *pinch out*. At least these had fewer corners than some.

I have a tendency to divide things into good parts and bad parts, and I apply that to writing. Expository stuff—setting out the facts clearly and fairly, without wise-ass—is work, and that’s almost all of an encyclopedia article. Sometimes in my amateur writing, I’m willing to do that to reach a chance to be amusing, but it’s even more fun to do comments, or remarks pointing to a Web site, when the set-up is done for me. (This may be similar to why some people enjoy writing fanfic; they don’t have to build the playground to play in it.) But I believe I’ve done a good job, and I know I’m getting money for it.

It wasn’t until I started writing them myself that I came to believe deep down inside that the reference books in libraries are like poems, rather than like trees. But the mortality and fallibility behind them becomes more obvious all the time. The Contemporary Authors Online obituary of Adam Osborne is particularly wretched. It repeats the correct information in the “Personal Information” intro that he was born in Bangkok, Thailand, then within three lines says he was born in India. Several dates are wrong as well. An article on Rev. Reggie says that he “reeked havoc on the field.” I’ve heard of odor of sanctity, but this is ridiculous.

There’s a revisionist theory on Osborne: that he didn’t destroy sales by promoting vaporware so much as another executive made stupid and costly decisions. So much for “the Osborne effect.”

### **Now everyone knows**

I’m a freelance copy-editor/proofreader. For one thing, I have been a professional Trekkie, copy-editing Star Trek fiction and nonfiction. I consider it unprofessional to talk about specific books I’ve worked on.

(Though sometimes something amuses me enough to discuss it with the serial numbers filed off, like the character who was given a powerful drug that caused him to “lose conciseness.” I’ve known some people who use that stuff.)

Anyway, I got a call earlier this year to edit a movie novelization. I immediately realized that I could probably get paid or laid for telling people about it. You guessed it: *Serenity*. But I didn’t. I don’t consider myself a moral hero, but I do have some standards.

More recently, I copy-edited another movie novelization, and for the first time I was asked to sign a nondisclosure agreement, which I did. I would guess there’s someone out there who would pay to know what happens in this one, but even if I hadn’t signed the agreement, the temptation to look for such a deal would be a lot less.

### **Left out of the movie**

They fuck the poor whenever they can, they screwed the pooch in Iraq, they piss off the rest of the world, they rape the environment, they buggered up the hurricane recovery, and they shit on the Constitution and wipe their asses on the Bill of Rights. What do you call a government like that?

The aristocrats.

Science doesn’t know whether the world was created. It certainly doesn’t say yes, and it doesn’t say no unless one believes that Ockham’s razor is a Law of How Things Are, rather than a good way of designing theories.

That’s not good enough for some of our domestic ayatollahs, who are promoting the doctrine of *intelligent design*, a way of dressing creationism in a lab coat and giving it shocks until it stops saying, “God.” Some, offended by that simultaneous mockery of science and religion, have parodied it with the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, who not only created everything but also reaches into the world

with His Noodley Appendage to make experiments come out the way He wants them to.

I like that, but my church, the Church of the SuperGenius, believes that Coyote created the material world in a particularly tricksterish moment. So I had a supplementary revelation. Actually, Coyote *blamed* the world on the Flying Spaghetti Monster on the grounds that it was made in the FSM’s tangled image.

So it is now the official policy of the Church of the SuperGenius that the Flying Spaghetti Monster created the world.

I usually wear two hearing aids, but one was in the shop. One day I couldn’t find the remaining hearing aid on my dresser without turning on the light and probably waking the other two. When I found it, I told Bernadette: “I can hear again! Pat Robertson is on TV, and I just put my ear to the screen and he healed me! Now about these hemorrhoids...”

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When the French existentialist Gabriel Marcel gave a series of lectures on “The existential background of human dignity” at Harvard, at one point he said, “I cannot explain this in words, but if I had a piano, I could play it.” It is alleged that a grad student was heard to reply, “And if I had a piano, I could refute him.”

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### **Not forgotten**

For many years I have belonged to an online list for copy-editors (CE-L). Its managers do a heroic group of keeping a gathering of highly verbal participants from turning into a mere center of high-level chit-chat, rather than a valuable source of information. Still, some personalities shine through. One of those was **David Noel Isserlis Ibbetson**, a seventy-year-old British-born Canadian Jew who had something to say on almost every question that came up. Ibid, as he called

himself, suffered from a neuromuscular disease that kept him in frequent pain, but you wouldn't know it from his cheerful and knowledgeable online conversation. Complications following a broken leg did him in a few months ago. The list and the world are poorer places without him.

About forty years ago, I saw a Beatles special on TV. It was a lot of fun; I particularly remember their version of "Pyramus and Thisbe." I also remember the guest stars, including a tall gentleman known as **Long John Baldry**, who sang some powerful r & b. He made some records, and he helped discover Rod Stewart and Elton John, but he never really made the big time.

**Linda Ann Moss** has died. We'd been out of touch for something like 20 years, but before that, I enjoyed being in amateur press associations with her and meeting her at the 1982 Worldcon. So it goes.

**James (Scottie) Doohan:** The body canna stand the strain, Cap'n.

**Wayne C. Booth**, a great literary critic. He is best known for *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, which, among other things, introduced the term *unreliable narrator*. He himself became one of those with the delightful essay "Thomas Mann and Eighteenth-Century Comic Fiction," in which he demonstrated that all literature sprang from his dissertation topic, *Tristram Shandy*.

**Louis Nye**, remembered by old folks like me as Gordon Hathaway, the Madison Avenue hipster who said "Hi-ho, Steverino" on *The Steve Allen Show*. He appeared in the movie *OC and Stiggs* in the 80s, doing the same act, which was then perceived as gay.

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## **Mundane**

I recently passed a couple of milestones: ~~My mile feels much better~~ thirteen years off drugs and 63 years alive. The day after the latter, I took a blood test.

I now have high cholesterol and Type II diabetes. Neither surprises me: The only vice I have left is food that tastes good, and I have so many diabetic ancestors that I've been expecting this all my life. I had already started exercising three months ago (walking for half an hour every day), and I should be able to develop a taste for artificial sweeteners. Of course, the better food tastes and the less trouble it is to prepare, the worse it is for you. I have confidence in my ability to manage, though one of the things I hate most is maintenance.

I take seriously the old gag about "the missing link between the apes and civilized humanity is us." I always identify with the transcendents, the conscious machines, the conscious stars—whatever gets free of the raging doomed animals we are all fastened to and can still pass a Turing test. Another reason I consider myself an inferior machine (unlike the PETAmans, who consider themselves inferior animals): I have to be aware of too much of my own maintenance.

But still, I am confirmed in my belief that cooked vegetables not only violate the gas provisions of the quaint old Geneva convention but are less healthful than raw ones. So I'll eat more raw cauliflower, carrots, and peapods, and perhaps others. Sweets for the sweet; pass the crudités.

I've been tireder than usual recently, taking two or even three naps a day. (That's my excuse for thisish being late.) I thought that was simply a matter of never having been that old before, but I am informed that it's probably from the diabetes and will improve when I get better blood control. So there's hope at the bottom of Pandora's Box.