

Nice Distinctions 2

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My mother always told me that when things go bad, I should remember how lucky I am, and how many people have it worse.

So I'm lucky that I wasn't hurt in the auto accident, and neither was anyone else. I had just taken Bernadette to the subway station, and as I was driving back, a tire blew, and the car began doing weird stuff. I had my seat belt on, and the air bag deployed. The car hit the median divider and a guard rail. I'm glad I was on a road where it would take a tank to get to the traffic on the other side, and that I wound up blocking only one lane, so the people driving around me didn't hate me as much. I was uninjured, but I accepted an ambulance ride to the nearest emergency room. The rules required that I be strapped to a surfboard (which is probably not the technical term for it) with my head immobilized for the ride. If I ever thought I might possibly enjoy bondage, I am now sure I don't. Before I could yield to the temptation to scream until they either rescued me or taped my mouth, I was at the hospital, and soon they had me unbound. I called Kevin, who as usual was a comfort. They kept me there for a few hours to see if I would fall down or puke or anything, and when I didn't, they released me. The car is totaled, but the insurance company is being civilized. I wound up with two bruises, both tolerable, one from the restraints.

I have never been comforted by how lucky I was not to be as miserable as others. (Can you say Schadenfreude?) I think my mother told me that so I would not be a pain in the ass complaining to people, and I hope that has worked in this case.

Other than that, we are surviving. I've been getting more copy-editing and proofreading work and writing reference articles; Bernadette and Kevin are likewise gainfully employed.

The only president we have prides himself on living by the Bible, so it is no surprise that his Iraq policy came from Hebrews 11:1-2:

Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

For by it the elders obtained a good report.

For some reason this good report did not produce the MacGuffins or perhaps Snipes of Mass Destruction, but I fear that our elders will continue their faith-based search.

Reality Shows

Perhaps it's time for a reality show called *Downsize*, in which Fox fires an executive every week and we get to watch the contenders scheme, lie, bribe, and blow not to be this week's loser. A nice twist ending would be the final nonwinner using some of the diabolical tricks he had used on his rivals on Mr. Murdoch himself.

I'm still on livejournal (as **supergee**), and it inspires me to write more. There are also quizzes, many of which are sophomoric, pointless, and/or ill-spelled, but from them I have learned I am a book nerd, the sonnet, Jack the Ripper, the class geek, *The Gashlycrumb Tinies*, Psycho, the Dragon (from *Sinfest*), 89.25% Bookworm, Alexander Hamilton, drip coffee, Stoner Bear, a Hippie, a Mentalist, *chie* (wisdom), Mr. Krabs, Sylvester the Cat, secretly evil, an Elite Grammar Whore, J.-P. Serre's *Linear Representations of Finite Groups*, and the Hi-Tech Sex Toy of the Future, and I qualify for the Fifth Level of Dante's Inferno with the Wrathful and Gloomy, which figures.

Bernadette tutors high school students, and notices that they are expected to have all sorts of extracurricular activities so as to be "well-rounded." (Consider a perfectly spherical student, with equal interests in all directions.) Nevertheless, I'm proud to be a geek. I get more and more tired of the apotheosis of well-roundedness, whether it's Heinlein's list of all the things a person should be able to do to be considered human, or saying that people who are "too" interested in something "have too much free time." The British Pocket Essentials Guide to Conspiracy Theories says, "*Trainspotter* and *anorak* are terms media representatives use for people who have a longer attention span than they do." Geekery is a form of division of labor, which is what got humanity to the moderate amount of civilization we have now; it's a negentropic factor that is as natural as entropy.

It's been more than 40 years since I decided that blue jeans were a uniform (usually Beatnik or Proletarian Wannabe) and stopped wearing them.

I have come to the grim conclusion that what one wears will be taken as a "statement," no matter what, just as we are all continuously emitting what will be considered "body language." I take only as much cognizance of this situation as I feel I have to. It could be worse: Women are often alleged to have made sexual offers in one of these "languages."

Another alarming conclusion is that the easy access to information on the web leaves no excuse for bullshitting off the top of one's

head. I believe I am posting less but better in all venues as this sinks in.

William Gibson's latest novel is set in the present, and thus may not "really" be sf. Much is being made of this, but I see it as a useful bit of self-knowledge. He is ten years ahead of his time, but his time was 1983.

Poetry should be elliptical: focused on the writer and the reader.

You get justice in the next world; in this world you get the law—William Gaddis

You get truth in the next world; in this world you get science.

Sign at a demonstration: Bush has it backwards: Abortion is surgical; bombing is murder

ICFA 2003

All three of us—my spouse Bernadette Bosky, my cohusband Kevin Maroney, and I—made it to the ICFA this year. Bernadette had not been able to attend last year, but this was an ICFA at which her presence was even more appropriate than usual, as the stated theme (Dark Myths and Legends in the Fantastic) is very much her area of expertise, and she has written scholarly papers and an encyclopedia article on Guest Author Ramsey Campbell.

The flight down on Tuesday was uneventful, as we missed even the long airport security delays that were supposed to be our fate in time of war. The following day, the festivities began for me with a session on slash.

It was like a Samuel R. Delany novel in which words suddenly don't mean what the reader thinks they do. "Slasher" is not a person brandishing a razor, but someone who writes stories in which two male characters from a movie or TV show have sex with each other. "Fandom" (no adjective) is the set of people who write and read slash. "The canon" is the actual works of pop culture that the fiction is based on.

Actually, I'd first heard of this sort of thing in the Eighties, and immediately found it at least conceptually interesting. It has even been done by professionals. I very much enjoyed Robert Coover's "You Must Remember This," a supplement to *Casablanca* which tells us in loving detail exactly what Rick and Ilsa

did when the cameras were not watching them. Nowadays Coover's story would be called "het," as "slash" is specifically same-sex. The latter could be represented by a video I once saw in which Eddie Murphy portrayed an intimate moment between Ralph Kramden and Ed Norton of *The Honey-mooners*. (You know you're getting old when you think that Ed Norton and Matt Dillon are roles, rather than actors.)

The subcultures are fascinating. Just as science fiction fandom soon became self-referential and now has fanzines devoted to other fanzines (and further iterations thereof), so the slash community is more and more about itself. Cassandra Claire's "Very Secret Diaries" of the Lord of the Rings movies, which I had thought of as merely a hilarious parody, has developed its own subculture. I also learned that much of this has taken place on livejournal, which clearly is a house that contains many mansions.

The following morning I attended a session on "Time and Transformation," specifically in Latin American literature. Sharon Sieber spoke on the view of all time as simultaneous, in the writings of Octavio Paz, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and Jorge Luis Borges. (Ishmael Reed based *Flight to Canada*, in which time collapses to the point where American slaves flee the plantation by airplane and the assassination of Abraham Lincoln is televised live, on an African version of that philosophy). Robin McKinley discussed Borges's Berkeley—an image of the world being created by being perceived, as the reader creates the world being read about. The following session was called "Undeath and the Dark Carnival": Jason Nolan traced the vampire image to the medieval works of Walter Map and William of Newburg; Jeri Zulli, who always has something of interest to tell us about the fantastic in early American writing, pointed out that the Puritans had a natural talent for horror; and Rhonda Brock-Servais discussed the Dark Carnival theme, from Bakhtin to Bradbury.

Guest of Honor Charles de Lint spoke about the creative process at the lunch banquet, and then it was off to a session on Making the Canon Fantastic, with Donald Morse explicating some of the intricacies of Joe Haldeman's *The Hemingway Hoax* and Terry Weyna with a section of what promises

to be a remarkable study of the Romantic Poets as figures in speculative fiction.

Thereafter I decided the session on paranoia and Gnosticism didn't sound weird enough, so I went to the Fandom panel. There, as many as possible of the subcultures bearing that name were discussed. There was a mention of Biblical slash (in a way I find it totally unsurprising that the most popular pairing is Jesus/Judas), but there were also representatives of the older cultures called fandom, with fanzines and amateur press associations and such. (Now that Joe [NMI] Sanders has retired and presumably has no need for academic respectability, I trust he will not mind my outing him as a member of the legendary Fantasy Amateur Press Association, the original science fiction apa started by Don Wollheim, and also where Bernadette and I met.)

Friday I got to hear a number of thought-provoking papers, such as Farah Mendlesohn on a new fantasy taxonomy and its application to the recent Fantastic issue of *Conjunctions*, William C. Spruiell on the art of science-fictional neologism, Jason Bernabei on Lord of the Rings from the Ring's point of view, and Charles Nelson on the similarities between LotR and *Alice in Wonderland*. The high point for me, however, was what might be called a bit of recursive transgressiveness: S.T. Joshi's Scholar Guest of Honor speech.

Transgressiveness is of course always relative to a particular environment, and today one of the most marginalized, liminal, counterhegemonic approaches is what Joshi presented: a defense of traditional literary values (with examples indicating the diversity of those creating such work; it has been remarked that the Canon is Heterosexual White Male Writing such as *Remembrance of Things Past*, *Invisible Man*, and *Pride and Prejudice*). One might disagree with the speech, but it is salutary to have one's views challenged occasionally.

The evening was concluded with a reading by Ramsey Campbell, introduced by Bernadette. The following morning I heard the paper I liked best of all those I heard at the conference: John Kessel's "Creating the Innocent Killer," a clarification of what a marvelous fantasy of "guiltless genocide" *Ender's Game* was: You were terribly abused *and* you

learned that you had to wipe the bad guys out or they'd kill you *and* the Establishment tricked you into doing all the killing when you thought you were doing something innocent *and* you get to be a wonderful person for feeling guilty even though, as shown above, it was Not Your Fault *and* you get to undo it. That wasn't the only highlight of the session. It was followed by Marc Zaldívar's paper on how the protagonists of both *Ender's Game* and Iain Banks's *The Player of Games* triumph by turning a finite game into an infinite game, and by Joe Sanders (the one with hair, as he says) discussing Rudyard Kipling's influence on Heinlein's *Citizen of the Galaxy*.

The next session included what *Locus* called "a strong paper": Bernadette on Ramsey Campbell, specifically *Incarinate*, a novel where the horror aspects mirror the sort of personal boundary problems discussed by family systems therapy. That went with what seemed to be a theme of the conference: liminality, the situation of being between stable states (I face that every time I travel, and never like it), or crossing what are supposed to be well-defined boundaries (such as male/female, life/death...). This may be the answer to "postmodernism" being almost definitionally that which there is nothing later than. We can say that the postmodern is actually the liminal, and now we have the chance to invent the postliminal. (No jokes about the subliminal, please.)

There was another slash session, this one including a paper on the disquieting concept of Real People Slash. Well, actually it was slash about the performers in boy bands, which is probably not quite the same thing. The last paper we heard was a fascinating one by Sondra Swift on Nicholas Hawksmoor, the architect who was the subject of a Peter Ackroyd novel, complete with geomantic and Masonic weirdness.

I fear that I have slighted the social aspects. Two friends we had missed for the last few years returned: Tony Magistrale and, from even deeper realms of the past, Nicholas Ruddick. I hope we will continue to see them at these gatherings. Also Peter Straub, Jennifer Stevenson, Donna and Steve Hooley (once again there was an overwhelmingly appealing session opposite Donna's annual

Aldiss paper), Sharon King, Susan George, Mary Pharr, Brett Cox, Jeanne Beckwith...

All these and more gathered in their finery for Saturday evening. If I dare say so myself, for once I approached the empyrean heights of sartorial splendor so frequently attained by David Hartwell, thanks to a shirt Bernadette bought me. As Homer Simpson put it, "They're *dogs*! And they're playing *poker*!" This year those in charge were cognizant of the excesses of previous banquets, and this one was characterized by brevity and decorum.

My disappointment was bearable. Besides, the next day we discovered that, like us, S.T. and Leslie Joshi were scheduled for a late afternoon flight out, so we spent a few pleasant hours chatting with them. Thence to the airport, and yet another pleasantly brief trip through security, not-too-delayed departure, and tolerable flight home. We eagerly look forward to next year.

Recent Reading

I have now read three books on Enron. The essence is obvious in all of them: Texas greed made worse by the financial postmodernism in which the urge to hedge one's bets creates newer and more terrifying risks (as a Taoist might predict). *Pipe Dreams*, by Robert Bryce, is a straightforward account of the mess, marred only by the author's insistence that the fiscal crimes were mirrored in, if not actually caused by, adultery and other sexual offenses within the firm. With the example of the two most recent federal administrations having so neatly divided up these two, one might be a bit dubious. Does Bryce have a control group, in the form of a large business where all are chaste?

Bryce expresses his feelings about one of the leading figures in the case with a chapter entitled, "Sherron Watkins Saves Her Own Ass." Watkins actually kind of agrees with that characterization in her own book, *Power Failure*, written with Mimi Swartz. It's a modest account of someone caught in something too big and nasty to comprehend.

Rich Kinder, who did much to make the company a success when it was still handling pipelines and other tangible products, then got out before the crash, had a saying about the new gimmicks: "Let's not smoke our own dope." Brian Cruver smoked the dope. He got

into the company shortly before the fall and wrote *Anatomy of Greed* about the experience. He tries to sound disapproving, but he's obviously excited by the Enron approach and eager to try it again. I have a nasty premonition that he will get to.

Christopher Hitchens often pisses me off, but he does not do so in *Unacknowledged Legislation*, a collection of his essays and reviews. There are marvelously thoughtful discussions of Oscar Wilde, Gore Vidal, and Anthony Powell, among others. Hitchens generally gives balanced evaluations, but the last section offers hatchet jobs on Tom Wolfe and Tom Clancy. John Leonard said that disliking Norman Podhoretz is "the normal respiration of intelligence," but Hitchens does it particularly well.

I guess the worst thing Hitchens does in this one is an aside slashing Hillary Clinton (about whom he is as pathologically phobic as William Safire is), saying that she "channeled" Eleanor Roosevelt. Clinton made clear that it was an exercise in imagination, not invoking any entities that would offend either a Christian or a materialist. (The slightest whiff of either woo-woo or more standard religion gets Hitchens's nostrils flaring.)

A while back, Alison Lurie did a study of children's books and gave it the irresistible title of *Don't Tell the Grown-Ups*. Now she has a new one, *Boys and Girls Forever*, based on the idea that most of the great children's writers have remained children as much as possible, and that most of these are British or American because those two cultures privilege childhood the most. This theme notwithstanding, she gives interesting accounts of Hans Christian Andersen and Tove Jansson, along with the oddness of Oz, the excessive maleness of the Dr. Seuss books, and the opposition to J.K. Rowling. While I'm mentioning Lurie, let me put in a good word for *Familiar Spirits*, her weirdly fascinating account of the ouija-board experiments of James Merrill and David Jackson.

Gerald Nachman's new book, *Seriously Funny*, deals with a subject that fascinates me: 50s and 60s comedians.

It all began with Mort Sahl, who didn't dress like a comic and didn't act like a comic: Comics wore tuxes and ragged on their wives;

Sahl wore a sweater over an open-necked shirt, and he read from the newspaper and commented calmly on it. He was known for his incisive political remarks, but he also talked about the town where "I asked a cab driver where the action was, so he took me to a place where they fish illegally." Sahl went on to take his mission too seriously, boring audiences with harangues about the Warren Report and such. He is, however, still funny at times ("Jewish mothers now say, 'My son never faxes.'")

In his wake came comics who acted and let the laughs flow from character and situation, instead of just delivering gags: Shelley Berman, Bob Newhart, Nichols and May. They did comedy records and concerts, as well as performing in clubs. Nachman talks about these, including the famous behind-the-scenes TV program that showed Berman flying into a rage when a ringing phone interrupted his act, and thus essentially concluded his career. (It now seems to have been a set-up, though Berman was very much the sort who could be set up that way.)

Nachman broadens his mission to include other humorous figures of the 50s, such as Tom Lehrer, Steve Allen, and Ernie Kovacs. There's a chapter on the radio performers, Jean Shepherd and Bob & Ray. He says that there are people who don't find Bob & Ray funny. Until then, I feared I might be the only one. (Maybe it's that "gentle humor" thing; I never actually laugh at Garrison Keillor's work.)

Into the 60s, with Lenny Bruce of course, whom Nachman refers to as "The Elvis of Stand-Up." Nachman knows that Lenny was often not funny, particularly towards the end (he certainly had enough to not be funny about at that point), but when he was on, he did things that hadn't been approximated. There are minor flaws in the chapter, caused by Nachman's mistaken belief that Albert Goldman's *Ladies and Gentlemen, Lenny Bruce* is a book, rather than a regurgitated bolus of hatred and envy.

Nachman also supports another of my unpopular beliefs—that before they shocked the nation with moderate televised doses of sex, drugs, and rebellion, the Smothers Brothers weren't terribly funny. It was Tommy acting like a moron, or the two of them being dysfunctional about "Mom always liked you best."

Codger's Corner

Here are my five all-time favorite single records:

The Platters, **The Great Pretender** (1955). The first record I ever bought. The magnificent voice of Tony Williams, and at least passable lyrics. Now it's on the easy-listening stations, but then it was rock & roll, with too much of a beat for decent society. I still love it, or as they said on another record, "I fall in love again as I did then."

Elvis Presley, **Heartbreak Hotel** (1956). The first time I heard it, I thought it was two people, a man and a woman. It was totally weird—the voice/s, the over-the-top lyrics (The bellhop's tears keep flowing; the desk clerk's dressed in black), the accompaniment. It transcended sex; it transcended race. Nothing would ever be the same. (I do not understand how Greil Marcus can be such an Elvis fan that he wrote two books about the King, and still not like "Heartbreak Hotel.")

The Marcels, **Blue Moon** (1961). Some say that the music died in 1960, only to be brought back by the British Invasion. Others say it was continuing to improve, despite some setbacks, and then it was taken over by foreign white boys inadvertently parodying black music. They're both right. In the 1960-4 interregnum, doo-wop either reached a peak or became decadent. (The existence of self-referential songs such as "Who Put the Bomp" and "Mr. Bass Man" could be evidence either way.) To me, it was definitely a peak, with the Rivingtons, the Corsairs, Vito & the Salutations, and of course the Marcels. Years earlier, a reviewer had described the Drifters' up-tempo version of "White Christmas" as "a vulgar barnyard travesty of a beloved American classic." There has never been a vulgar barnyard travesty like the Marcels' version of Rodgers & Hart's "Blue Moon."

Big Brother & the Holding Company, **Down on Me** (1967). It was the Summer of Love, and everything was supposed to be soft and sweet and groovy, and then all of a sudden there was this, in its own way fulfilling LaVern Baker, Little Richard, the Four Seasons, and everyone who'd ever screamed or howled into a mike. It was the last single;

everyone including Janis was starting to do longer and longer songs, and combining them into albums that had themes and everything, and the adolescents who couldn't follow the music into maturity would say that it died.

Big Daddy, **The Rose** (1984). OK, so the music died, and whenever a new song came out, I listened to an old one. Still, I noticed a few things that didn't sound New and thus Ugly, including a lovely and poetic ballad called "The Rose." I wasn't the only one who missed the old days. A group called Big Daddy did an album based on the schtick that they had been captured in Indochina in 1959 and just released, so they would record new songs to sound like theirs. (Actually, they included a version of "Hotel California" that resembled Del Shannon's "Runaway," from 1961.) There was, for instance, a marvelous *a capella* version of "Eye of the Tiger." The best of all, though, was "The Rose" as a rockabilly song. I like to think there's a universe someplace where that version was a hit in 1959 and Bette Midler dared to do it as a ballad 25 years later and put it back on the charts.

Roy Tackett (1925-2003)

The man known as HORT (Horrible Old Roy Tackett) died on May 23. He was a long-time fanzine fan, publishing over a hundred issues of *Dynatron*. He was a Trans-Atlantic Fan Fund winner and a Worldcon Fan GoH, and he was pretty much the first to introduce Japanese sf fandom to America. He and I spent many years together in FAPA and FLAP. I met him at Denvention in 1981, and enjoyed the meeting, but mostly I knew him on the printed page (and later, screen), where I always looked forward to his words. He and I disagreed on many things, but we always got along.

His last years were difficult: Widowed twice, paralyzed on one side by a stroke, living in a care facility, Roy tapped out notes to the fannish mailing lists with his one good hand. (Like archy the cockroach, he had an acceptable excuse for eschewing capital letters.) The enforced terseness made some of his messages Zen telegrams. I miss him.