

Nice Distinctions 4

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Sneaking in one last issue before the new year.

Hurricane Isabel huffed and puffed, but did not blow our house down. More troublesome was the malign program Worm.Automat, of which I received several hundred copies before Panix blocked them all. I guess Worm.Automats is what we'll all eventually be, or at least some type of worm restaurant. Anyway, the program I personify as Emperor Norton caught all of them before I had a chance to run the worm, which I knew better than to do anyway. (There's something catlike about the way the emperor brings me the remains of viruses it has killed and asks me how to dispose of them.) I guess the sign of how nasty it was is that many of the messages claimed to be from Microsoft, and you could ask, "Is it really from Microsoft?" "No, WORSE."

I have celebrated eleven years off drugs. The fellowship says, "One day at a time," but I'm a mathematician, and I know that if I stay clean today, I can stay clean tomorrow.

I took another liver test (Live! From the beautiful bright-yellow Jaundice Room, it's Billy Rubin and the Hepatitis with "Let Me Go, Liver"), and my medications are not raising it or anything, so I'm keeping the same dosages.

I used to be known in zine fandom as "Uncle Arthur." There were Nancy Buttons that said "Uncle Arthur's Nephew" and "Uncle Arthur's Nieces." Then some of my fannish nephews and nieces had kids of their own, so I started saying, "You may think I'm a mediocre uncle, but now I'm a Great Uncle." Now I am literally a Great Uncle. My niece Stephanie gave birth to her first child, a boy they have named Levi.

They sent pictures via the wonders of the Internet, and he is definitely a baby.

Once upon a time, it was acceptable to attribute mental traits to entire races. We are presumably too civilized for that now, but we still use the words *masculine* and *feminine*. For instance there's a new book, *The Essential Difference*, by Cambridge University psychologist Simon Baron-Cohen, that defines autism as an imbalance between two kinds of intelligence: the kind used to understand people (he calls it "empathizing") and the kind used to understand things ("systemizing"), which is OK, except that then, like a kid with a Magic Marker standing in front of a subway ad, he draws genitals on the picture.

Of course, more women than men are empathizing, and more men than women are systemizing, but defining the characteristics as female and male, respectively, does not help. It does not help those who don't fit the map, it doesn't help us get away from the mapping of sexual difference onto every other dualism, and it doesn't help us think of ourselves as humans, who think, dream, and create, rather than bucks and does who fight, breed, and die.

A couple of applications to sf writers:

- 1) Robert Heinlein's combination of strong sexual dimorphism and really really liking women is rare. (The latter all by itself is not all that common.)
- 2) Add Philip K. Dick's theories to Baron-Cohen's, and you may wind up with "Women are human; men are androids."

This is America. Anyone can choose to be marginalized.

Native Informant

The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there—L.P. Hartley

There was a report recently that Abercrombie & Fitch was in trouble for having an insufficient number of dark-skinned people in their catalogs. Quite reasonable of course, but I flashed back to forty years ago at proverbially liberal Swarthmore. We were watching the World Series in a dorm rec room, and we all burst into applause when, for the first time any of us could recall, there was one (1) “Negro” in a TV commercial. The sponsor presumably survived this daring act, and soon there were more.

I’m over sixty now, and I’m finally getting that feeling that I was alive way back in History, in the Dark Ages before television, when there were sixteen major league baseball (we didn’t capitalize it back then) teams, none further south or west than St. Louis; when a long distance call was a big enough deal that it usually meant someone had died; when women were expected to keep their hair the color it would naturally be, to the point that there were commercials with the suggestively inexplicit phrase “Does she or doesn’t she?” to imply the opposite possibility. (There was the even more dangerous vision of men coloring their hair, but that would at most be a refusal to accept grayness, rather than an unmanly desire for ornamentation)

One difference that comes to mind is that we took Sigmund Freud seriously in a way that may be unimaginable today. It’s something of a commonplace now that the intellectual classes were influenced by Freud and Marx, and that trickled down to the masses, but Freud was far more pervasive, perhaps because his theories were not the target of a governmental persecution campaign or because no entire country had gone down the toilet by following them.

It should of course be made clear that, as is usual in such cases, Freud himself had not been a Freudian. For instance, he had made it clear that he didn’t believe his methods could work on psychosis, and in general he had the proper modesty of the scientist, knowing that his theories are but hypotheses, subject to later correction and modification. His American disciples, however, thought he was being overly shy.

And so in the 50s there was analysis terminable and interminable (as the Founder himself had said), much of it approaching the latter. Being in analysis was a status symbol (another phrase that gained currency in those days).

Because Freud’s theory was considered a science of universal applicability, it presumably could be used on people without their knowledge and consent. The big scare book about that was Vance Packard’s *The Hidden Persuaders*, which warned that powerful symbolic meanings could sway purchasers at a subconscious level. Shortly after reading the book, I was watching television and saw a gasoline commercial featuring a close-up of the gas nozzle entering the tank. Aha! Well, not aha. It soon became clear that Freudian theories, like all the other theories in the advertising biz, worked on pretty much a chance basis, and now one of the most successful brand names in the world is Microsoft.

Freud himself had a calm approach to homosexuality, but in moralistic America, the very idea brought horror. This led to an emphasis on the remarkable concept of latent homosexuality. It was used rather as the Thomists used substance vs. accidents or the Marxists used the term *objectively*. What they sought didn’t seem to be there, but the theory predicted it, so it was REALLY there. In particular, if a man didn’t settle down with one woman and have children, he was REALLY homosexual. This approach reached its peak in the writings of the remarkable Dr. Edmund Bergler, the Savonarola of the Freudian creed, who described all sex he didn’t like as *Neurotic Counterfeit-Sex*. (He also wrote *The Writer and Psychoanalysis*, in which, with his usual love for the universal quantifier, he proclaimed that all writer’s block was caused by early weaning. The second edition included an afterword diagnosing the mental illnesses of all those who had failed to recognize the truth of the first edition.)

It was this concept of latent homosexuality that had a great deal to do with what turned me against Freud: the 1964 *Fact* magazine article that warned against Barry Goldwater’s candidacy on psychiatric grounds.

Look: I didn’t vote for the guy. It was my first election, and I voted for the candidate

who was supposedly *not* going to send half a million Americans into an Asian land war, and I will always feel like something of an abused voter. But here were these supposed medical scientists telling me that one of the presidential candidates was crazy—was a “latent homosexual” who had said, “I want to be able to lob a missile into the men’s room at the Kremlin.” (That’s the evidence. Really. His no less heterosexual rival had remarked, “I never trust a man until I have his pecker in my pocket,” but that was not adduced.) Could the political beliefs of these scientists have something to do with their judgments? One Thomas Szasz, previously unknown to me, certainly thought so.

In retrospect, it is easy to see how much of the apparently scientific discussion of mental problems reduced to Blaming Mommy. The great horrible example of this approach was Bruno Bettelheim, whose treatment of the kids in his care eventually got him the name of Benno Brutaheim, deciding that all (there’s that word again) autism was the result of “refrigerator moms” who didn’t love the kids enough.

One particular type of input was lacking. Freud had made the memorable statement that he did not know what a woman wanted, and the more one looked at his writings, the more evidence one found of precisely that.

There probably weren’t enough women in the movement to tell him different, even if he had been willing to listen. (Though as usually happens, there were more than history told about.) Freud had concluded that women can have two kinds of orgasm—clitoral and vaginal—and that these are, respectively, immature and mature.

It was assumed for years that this was, like so much else in the Freudian approach, not subject to experimental falsification, or at least that the standards of decent society would never allow such a test. But just as those standards were violated by Dr. Kinsey, asking questions that determined that the deviants were nowhere near as alone as they had thought, so there were eventually actual physiological tests violating the supposed sanctity of the Act and determining (I cannot resist putting it this way) that female satisfaction need not depend on the master’s johnson. The feminist movement might not have brought into existence by those results, but it immediately had clear evidence that

Freud and those who followed him failed to understand women in a crucial way.

By now, we may have reached the point where it is necessary to remember that there were good parts to Freud. He had genuine wit, his theories were useful in the particular circumstances of early-20th-century Austria, and some of the mechanisms he discovered, such as projection, still work when the bad parts of his theory are removed.

The problem may be greater than we have realized

From all my anecdotal evidence, I agree that as a nation we are a bunch of mathematics illiterates—financial column in local paper

Nasty, Brutish, & Short

Just as in that better world we are given a glimpse into once a week, our president pardoned a turkey for Thanksgiving. Once out of camera and microphone range, he assumed a high-pitched voice and screamed, “Gobble, gobble, gobble. Don’t slaughter me!”

I think the nearest thing to a consensus the United States has on prostitution is that it should be illegal but not unavailable.

Muslims follow an old-fashioned sexist religion that tells women to cover their faces with veils, instead of makeup.

Why is HTML like *Un Chien Andalou*?
/i

Some unimaginative minds get so stunned at the concept of homosexuality as to forget that people who do it average over 23 hours a day not doing it.

There were two boxes of propaganda hand-outs at the local pharmacy. One said, “Viagra,” and the other said, “bone health.”

Calvin is obviously an unpopular, loner kid. He’ll grow up to be a science-fiction fan or a serial killer. (“The tiger told me to kill them.”)



Recent Reading

Francis Spufford is *The Child That Books Built*, and he has written a charming book about how his childhood reading influenced him. He recognizes the beauty in the Narnia books, but also the misogyny and bullying. He talks about Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House books, and how her daughter/ghostwriter Rose Wilder Lane adapted them to her own libertarian agenda. He also discusses the ways in which Borges wrote sf.

Sometimes *The Onion* gets it frighteningly right, as in Bush's inaugural speech: "Our long national nightmare of peace and prosperity is over." Likewise, the description of AOL's purchase of Time Warner as the "largest internet play money transaction in history." Alec Klein describes the latter in *Stealing Time*. It starts with Billy von Meister, the sort of corporate sociopath whose exploits are more amusing if one can forget that they are about real money and the power thereof. For one of his projects, von Meister hired one Steve Case, then apparently still short of his level of incompetence working as a pizza taste tester, largely because Case's brother had money. Like Bill Gates and other geniuses of the computer age, Case was lucky enough to be there when the manna fell and mean enough to hang on to the advantages that gave him. AOL had the same sort of corporate culture as Enron--creative accounting, competitive wealth display, sexual harassment as an executive's God-given right. They did not get quite as baroque and self-referential in their financial statements as Enron did, but only because they didn't have as much time. Eventually, they triumphed, at least for a while, but now it has come undone. The book gives relatively little account of the great moment when AOL-TW's top staff gave in to staff demands that they permit Net and Web services other than AOL, because they were being forced to return to troglodytic methods such as faxing and FedEx to transmit urgent messages. (No matter how sick the pope gets, they never take him to Lourdes, but this is ridiculous.) Now that Time Warner has gone back to its original name, perhaps we should refer to AOL as "the ISP that dares not speak its name."

Some of the general theoretical background to this sort of thing appears in *The Number*, by Alex Berenson, which traces the history of how business and accounting have corrupted one another to produce a suitable fiction that purports to show how well a business is working. It is an old folk theme, found in "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" and "The Great Big Wheel," among others: the device that produces wonders but cannot be turned off. One example is the way such promising ideas as conglomeration and leveraged buy-outs turned to disaster when all the companies fit for such things had been taken care of and the winners went for each other's throats. Likewise, supposed indicators of corporate success bring about a continuing need for not only growth per se, but also growth in the rate of growth, which leaves the more adventurous ones running Ponzi schemes on themselves. (One notorious scam, Equity Funding, was caught when they were within a year or two of having to claim that they had insured everyone in the world and some twice. A similar mechanism was at work in Enron's pyramid of loan-granting organizations.)

An Open Book is a memoir by my favorite weekly book reviewer, Michael Dirda. (He insists that fiction categories are ways of writing well or badly, rather than measures of quality.) There's lots of good 50s nostalgia (for those who don't believe that is a contradiction in terms), but the best part is the tale of a geeky book-loving kid learning to deal with the world. Dirda's *Readings*, a selection of his longer *Washington Post* book essays, is now available in trade paperback. I recommend that one, too.

Gary Delsohn's *The Prosecutors* tells of a California DA's office and its dealings with major cases. One of the central ones is a particularly gross murder in which the perp, having failed by disorganization and stupidity to get to a store before the proceeds went into the drop safe, fired three shots into the clerk's gut at point-blank range with a pistol-grip shotgun. One really horrendous part is the effort to which the prosecution goes to maximize the punishment for this horrendous act, because there is nothing they can do to really alleviate the suffering of the victims' loved ones.

Delsohn's prosecutors, however vengeful, were honest. Mark Fuhrman, who has used his experience of corrupt, lying police work to write true crime books, has a new one, *Death and Justice*, that deals with the pursuit of the death penalty in Oklahoma. A prosecutor who considered each execution a notch on his law degree teamed up with a crime lab supervisor who practiced a sort of faith-based forensics in which the more convinced the police were of someone's guilt, the better the evidence was. They bumped off a number of people, some of whom may actually have killed someone, and Fuhrman was so grossed out by the whole business that he has decided the death penalty cannot be made to do justice.

Ben Sidran's musical tastes are not mine. He likes jazz, even vocal jazz (I consider the term *scat singer* appropriate), and he is guilty of writing Steve Miller's "The Joker." Still, I enjoyed his autobio, *Ben Sidran: A Life in the Music*, in which he appears as an intelligent, interesting person. What has made music worse for him is pretty much what has done the same for me: sheer loudness (what a *marvelous* idea to put a microphone right next to the kick drum; I was wondering what causes the sense of auditory assault I often feel), and the Big Hit mentality, which may destroy everything it touches—"real" business, as well as movies and books.

Jo Walton is a major fan of the novels of Anthony Trollope, but she was always a bit bothered by the way the characters, particularly the female ones, failed to behave like actual human beings. The logical solution was to write a Trollope novel for another species, in this case dragons, that did operate in that manner. *Tooth and Claw* works superlatively, including the specifically science-fictional task of matching the characters and culture with the biological differences from humans.

I was aware of Patricia Highsmith as an author of the sort of books Alfred Hitchcock could film, and then I learned that she also wrote *The Price of Salt*, generally considered the best lesbian novel of the 50s (at the time attributed to "Claire Morgan" and now published as *Carol*, with Highsmith's name on it). That set up a bit of cognitive dissonance, but *Beautiful Shadow: A Life of Patricia*

Highsmith, by Andrew Wilson, makes sense of it. Highsmith had a history of falling in love with her ideal of a woman and being disappointed with the reality. (To a great extent she did not like people in general and women in particular.) *The Price of Salt* was based on a customer Highsmith met once when she was working as a salesperson and apparently never encountered again; she did have the woman's name and address from the sales record, and she made a couple of trips to her house, but gave up way below the Luskin level of fascinated pursuit. (Wilson was able to find the identity of the original Carol. Apparently unbeknownst to Highsmith, she committed suicide shortly before the book was published. There's a recursive fiction plot there, if it hasn't been done already.) A couple of 50s things: Highsmith was fascinated by existentialism, reading Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, and she felt she had to pour money and time into the doomed psychoanalytic project of being "cured" of lesbianism. She also seems have been one of those, like Winston Churchill, who got more out of alcohol than it got out of them, drinking all day, but living to more than the Biblical three score and ten, still *compos mentis*. She had a bracing misanthropy, but in later years tainted it with the nastier specific forms, hating Blacks and Jews. Fascinating person, well described.

The news of Phil Spector's murder indictment reminded me that I hadn't read Mark Ribowsky's bio, *He's a Rebel*, when it was first published, so I checked it out. Musically, Spector was a hedgehog, rather than a fox. The one thing he could do was make music much more overwrought and melodramatic (which I love), from the early obscure stuff like Ray Peterson's "I Could Have Loved You So Well" and Gene Pitney's "Every Breath I Take" to the famous "You've Lost That Lovin' Feeling" and "River Deep, Mountain High." The book indicates that he has always been, in technical parlance, a shit and a nut. He took advantage of everyone who crossed his path, and he was subject to random rages. (I believe that it was after the book was published that someone said, "Phil has a bodyguard to protect other people from him.")

Advancing years have driven Robert Sheckley down to the level of mere excellence, as seen

in his new collection, *Uncanny Tales*. "Mind-Slaves of Manitori," "The Gift of Understanding," and "The Day the Aliens Came" are particularly good. Wouldn't it be great if books like this were still mass-market paperbacks?

Secrets of the Tomb, by Alexandra Robbins, is supposed to be the real story of Yale's legendary secret society, Skull and Bones, as opposed to the lurid excesses proposed by Ron Rosenbaum. (We are reassured, for instance, that the initiation ceremony does not include the phrase "Take that plunger out of my ass, Uncle Toby!") Robbins, herself a member of an unnamed secret society, does a thorough job of reporting Bones connections to power, from the society's founding in the 19th century to the recent concentration of Bonesmen in the list of those who helped brother George W. Bush attain far greater successes than possible by mere financial competence. As Robbins reports, Skull & Bones is now coeducational (no more lying in a tomb naked and masturbating before one's fellows, though Robbins maintains that never happened), and the membership has been broadened to include all the colors the crayon companies now offer in place of the old, insufficient "Flesh." This is of course, about time, but still to be applauded, though part of me wonders where the real Skull & Bones now meets.

Updates

In the first issue I mentioned Jack Benny and the Lone Ranger without further explanation. Both were radio shows.

Several of you asked what censorware objects to in the word *Brightwater*. It's that ...*twat*... in the middle. No doubt it has been subtly poisoning our minds all these years

My snotty comment about William Gibson in ND 2 was adapted from a snotty comment James Simon Kunen made about Hubert Humphrey in 1968.

Reports suggest that the resurrected Heinlein book may be good, but not as fiction. Interesting ideas, but presented in endless talk-talk. Who'da thunk it? Also there is to be a book written by Spider Robinson from a Heinlein

outline. The possibilities range from Best of Both to Worst of Both, which is quite a range.

Dennis Potter's *The Singing Detective* was made into a movie, and it's wonderful. Doctors and nurses breaking into song, switches among levels of self-reference, and all the horrors of Potter's own tortured life. Not as intensively recomplicated as the BBC miniseries, but excellent.

Not Forgotten

Hal Clement was a Science Teacher, which is an excellent thing to be, in real life, and as an sf author. I hardly knew him; we did a few panels together, on which he was unfailingly courteous, reasonable, and knowledgeable. He lived long, he did what he loved, and he won respect for it—all of which he deserved. He also gave the best definition of sf thinking I know: Take something obvious and imagine what happens if it's false.

Hugh Kenner was naturally bicultural, having a difficult decision in college: whether to major in English or math. Along with his great literary studies, such as *The Pound Era*, he wrote two books on Bucky Fuller: a popularization and an advanced study of geodesic mathematics. He was an early adopter of the personal computer, building one from a Heathkit in the late 70s. One thing he liked about computers was that they compensated for his hearing problems; he had lost most of his hearing at age five, to the point where it took a long time for hearing-aid technology to become powerful enough to help him. And the Church of the SuperGenius loves him for writing a book about Chuck Jones.

Also: the simultaneously deceased mystery writer Amanda Cross and literary critic Carolyn G. Heilbrun; two guys who were about as good as anyone at what they did (Johnny Cash and Warren Spahn); two guys I think of as one-hit wonders, James Whitehead (*Joiner*) and Walter J. Ong (*Orality & Literacy*); and Gregg Trend's beloved wife of many years, Monica.

Excelsior,

Arthur