

# Nice Distinctions 5

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Let's start with some good news. The Science Fiction Writers of America have named Robert Silverberg as the latest Grand Master. I don't think any sf writer has done as much that's as good, but I realize that others with different reading values could make the same claim for previous winners Poul Anderson and Jack Vance. For me, though, Silverberg's prose skills, willingness to fit into a larger literary picture than Science Fiction, and emphasis on character make him the best.

Valentine's Castle (the new Grand Master's works even gave us a name for our house) continues to survive. I've been busier than usual with paying work, and Bernadette and Kevin are likewise working. We're looking forward to the International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts in a few weeks.

I continue to enjoy livejournal, which, by reinforcing me for writing every day, helps me write more and do more zines. Another good thing about it is the cut-tag, a marvelous device whereby the writer can post material (offensive, personal, just plain long) on another page that the reader has to click on to read. If you use it, no one can take offense for grossness of detail and such. If you don't use it, everyone can. As a socially challenged sf guy, I love having comprehensible rules like that.

Before the year ended, I finished up my entries for the 50s encyclopedia, and as I've started posting in lj, here's what I really think of them:

**Richard Armour** seemed to have found an endless vein of cuteness: "Pantsy de Leon," "Lewis N. Clark"... At worst he was Dave Barry without the good parts. Once in a while, his stuff had some bite to it: "Junior college: a high school with ashtrays."

**Buddy Holly**. As good as everyone said. If nothing but the record with "Peggy Sue" on one side and "Every Day" on the other survived, he would belong in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, and he did much more

**Ernie Kovacs**. Also as good as they say. I talked about his brilliant TV stuff, but also mentioned his amusing showbiz novel *Zoomar* and his unforgettable performance as Captain Seguro in *Our Man in Havana*. I had to mention his musical gorillas, the Nairobi Trio, which may be what he's remembered for. I called it "performance art," by which of course I mean "boring shit once you get the point, which happens fairly quickly." (To be fair, it also had a certain amount of hit-on-the-head comedy, which likewise fails to amuse me.)

I've also been contributing to the *Wikipedia*, an online encyclopedia in which I get paid nothing, can have my work ripped apart by any idiot with computer access, and get no credit. Still, I enjoy writing for it, especially as I have been able to contribute on subjects that hadn't been covered, including Robert Coover, Robert Shea, John T. Sladek, Thomas M. Disch, and the Marcells. *Wikipedia* had already had an entry for Bob Shaw, but it mentioned neither his delightful fan writing nor slow glass.

Michael Moore is irresponsible, which is to say that, speaking from the left, he once in a while says something as vicious and inaccurate as what we have come to expect on a regular basis from Ann Coulter and Rush Limbaugh. An example of this is his statement that **George Bush** is a **DESERTER**. Not true, of course. Bush never fled under fire (not having given himself a chance to). Technically, **George Bush** is not a **DESERTER**.

Dealing with my pharmacy and my dentist, or more precisely dental care factory, tends to be fraught, but I have a strategy.

Back in 1976, when *est* was just becoming popular, there was a book entitled *est: Playing the Game the New Way*, by Carl Frederick. He was sued by the organization for using their name, and I believe the book was taken off the market, but I bought and read it before that.

It was a book about manipulative behavior in the good sense. (That may be where I first encountered the idea that when reason fails, the only approaches are manipulation and force.) One strategy I adopted was that, when dealing with a representative of an organization that was unduly complicating my life, it was less useful to demand my rights, no matter how good my claim was, than to courteously present the whole mess as a problem the individual could be a helpful and competent person by solving.

So I treat the people at the dentist and the druggist as intelligent people attempting to operate a system designed by brain-damaged space aliens, which is not a bad first approximation. (The dental factory's records are half on computer and half on paper.) I get friendly dealings and probably better service.

I don't usually write about football here, but here's a story that seems to have general application. What you need to know about this is that Brett Favre is a sure thing for the Hall of Fame, and that he had made a crucial mistake in a playoff game.

Bill Handleman, a sportswriter, said, There's no telling how badly Favre feels about throwing this interception, which resulted in the Green Bay Packers losing to the Eagles 20-17, losing a chance to go to the conference finals.

We don't know how he feels for the simple reason that he wouldn't come out and tell us last night. He wasn't talking after the game.

OK, listen to me, Handleman, you fucking vampire: You wouldn't know how he felt even if he'd gone along with the gag and talked to you. I think one has to be a starting NFL quarterback, perhaps even a great one, to have some idea of how he felt. You merely wish to take part in a shaming ritual.

Then you said, "The great ones come out and tell you what happened, what they were thinking." Right, and those pesky Weapons of Mass Destruction have managed to disguise themselves as sand. Eddie Murray never told

the sportswriters any of that stuff, but he got voted into the Baseball Hall of Fame by the very people he had snubbed because he was too good to be ignored.

It's not just sportswriters. *People Magazine* offers articles about some well-known person's "private pain." What sort of alleged human being offers someone else's private pain to anyone with \$3.95? One function of the mass media is to deflect envy and other negative feelings to those with ability and away from those with power, and one way of doing that is making quarterbacks more accountable than political and business leaders.

## Nasty, Brutish, and Short

**Infolalia:** The mental illness that causes its direct sufferer to tell others what they already know, such as estimated weight, noticeable age difference between partners, and the harmful effects of smoking .

Lincoln fought to maintain central control, but his spiritual descendants insist he was opposing slavery. The Confederacy fought to maintain slavery, but their spiritual descendants insist they were opposing central control.

An idea I got from Jerry Pournelle: A lot of politics is about persistence. The rich can pay people to be persistent for them.

Richard Sennett's new book makes it clear that he sees ability as some sort of unfair advantage the State should undo.

Technically, George Bush is not a **DESERTER**.

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Samuel R. Delany tells us that one of the essential things science fiction does is to literalize metaphors (her world exploded). Blogger Kieran Healy suggests a horror flick based on "The Constitution is a living document."

Speaking of literalized metaphors, at halftime of the Super Bowl, television became literally the Boob Tube. I suppose that if I'd never seen a nipple before, I'd be shocked or something. (The pin through it and her shirt being ripped off by wozzizname were more problematic. I

still prefer Lucy Lawless's display.) I watched the game, but skipped the halftime show, so I didn't know until later, and if it weren't for the miracles of TiVo and screen capture, I might have missed it entirely (a bearable fate). I also, un-American that I am, read during the commercial breaks, so I did not notice the Budweiser ad with the theme of equine flatulence or the many plugs for erectile dysfunction drugs, the most notable of which does not mention the purpose of the medication in question but shows a man throwing a football through a tire. (Lastish, I mentioned the use of Freudian symbolism in 50s commercials in an attempt to persuade hiddenly. Now of course it's ironic and self-referential, like everything else.)

On the other hand, there's a new flick (*Jesus Christ Supersnuff* or *Battlefield Golgotha* or something like that) with lotsa violence and torture, but none of that evil sex stuff, so it gets an OK-to-bring-the-kids rating. Makes you wonder what's important about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

But my favorite sign of the Collapse of Civilization As We Know It is same-sex marriage. To me, offering the privileges and responsibilities of marriage to any committed couple, regardless of plumbing, seems every bit as obvious as allowing people of all colors to use the same water fountains. One sign that this is a movement whose time has come is that it looks like a hydra: courts deciding that the equal protection of the law applies, couples traveling to our more civilized northern neighbor, respected figures such as Walter Cronkite speaking up in favor of it, the American Anthropological Association pointing out counterexamples to the belief that marriage has always and everywhere been one man/one woman, mayors refusing to enforce unjust law. (When Baby Dick Daley comes out in favor of same-sex marriage, you gotta wonder if Papa Dick is turning over in his grave or proud that the kid is just enough ahead of the curve.) The newspaper pictures told us: We have seen the enemy, and it is two women who have loved each other for 50 years. How terrifying.

The only president we have (but not for long) is terrified, or at least hopes we will be, and has introduced a Constitutional amendment to protect marriage from the same-sexers, which makes sense only if you believe

there may not be enough of it to go around if just *anyone* can have it.

Let us make clear that to some it is really not an issue of Freudian phobia. Orson Scott Card wrote a column lacking the gibbering terror with which Savage Michael approaches these questions, instead saying that it is a question of maintaining authority. Lots of authority. Unquestioned authority, and the certainty that the Rules will not change no matter how wrong they turn out to be. The column includes a paragraph on "activist judges attacking our traditions" that could have been cut-&-pasted from a reaction to *Brown vs. Board of Ed*. But when the fabric of society is choking enough people, it's time to get some new fabric.

There are conservatives who don't think like Card. James J. Kilpatrick, whom you may remember from the Point/Counterpoint discussions with Shana Alexander (or perhaps more likely the *Saturday Night Live* version with Dan Aykroyd saying, "Jane, you ignorant slut."), has been around so long that he did oppose *Brown vs. Board of Ed* (and repented of it a lot sooner than Strom Thurmond), but faced with Bush's amendment, he wrote:

The flaws in this obnoxious resolution are not merely syntactic or semantic. The proposed amendment—if I understand the ugly text—is mean-spirited, bigoted, uncharitable. It spits in the face of freedom.

It is been alleged that animal brains (and thus the part of the human brain that generates emotions) cannot process negatives. Gregory Bateson has pointed out that two dogs have to go through a complex rigmarole of not-fighting because they cannot simply say, "Let's not fight." Denying an emotive statement could thus be psychologically similar to affirming it. This could, perhaps, be a tactic.

Technically, George Bush is not a **DESERTER**.

The argument is not about whether Bush found a corrupt, privileged way of keeping his lily-white ass out of Vietnam; we know that. What the media are trying to determine from the tangled web of records is whether he then went on to punk out on his part of the bargain. (Like a dishonest politician being one who doesn't stay bought.)

I am an approximate contemporary of his, and I dodged the draft, via grad school and

then the War on Poverty. (I will admit that my service would have been more problematic if VISTA had tested us for unlawful substances.) But I did not say service was a wonderful thing for others; I supported our troops in the sense of wanting them home safe as quickly as possible; and I would have the simple decency, given my past, not to cross-dress as a soldier to encourage others in a new disastrous adventure.

## Recent Reading

Raymond Smullyan, *Who Knows?* This is a marvelous look at the Big Questions. Part 1 is based on his friend Martin Gardner's *The Whys of a Philosophical Scrivener*. For instance, Smullyan asks how we should describe an approach such as "I don't know whether there's a God, but I sure hope there is one." The second part discusses Hell, and here he and I are in complete agreement: It is conduct unworthy of a deity. Finally, he turns his attention to R.M. Bucke's *Cosmic Consciousness* and offers some insights on that. He has also written an autobiography called *Some Interesting Memories*, whose only flaw is that he remembers too many old jokes.

Michael Swanwick's *Cigar-Box Faust* is a collection of short-short stories, essays, and constructs. The section on Philip K. Dick is insightful, and the "Abecedary of the Imagination" is a box of sweets. If you like this, you might enjoy the allegedly mainstream collections of Lydia Davis.

If the Jesuits had created an atheist to their specifications, they would have come close to Madalyn Murray O'Hair: a woman who thinks for herself, refuses to accept authority in anything, enjoys sex and talks openly about it, but is also loud, aggressive, self-dramatizing, and often just plain dishonest. I first encountered her in the pages of *The Realist* in the 60s, after she'd won the case against prayer in the public schools. Like any paranoid, she was not entirely mistaken: She and her son Bill were assaulted by police and of course charged with assaulting police, but by this point she was accusing everyone who disagreed with her of being a Catholic agent (including, at times, Paul Krassner). She and her family eventually beat the phony charges

against them. Twenty years after the whole mess, Bill became a born-again Christian, and some of us wondered what had taken so long. In the end she was done by even worse than she did: The police beating left her in pain for life; O'Hair, her last husband, was actually snooping on her for the FBI; and she and her remaining family were brutally murdered. The story is in *UnGodly*, by Ted Dracos.

*Lies (and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them)*, by Al Franken, is basically good and funny, and nowhere near as smarmy as *Rush "Fatso" Limbaugh Is Really Fat*, or whatever he called it. He deals with Rush, Ann Coulter, and that lot with logic and facts, but the book loses coherence as it goes on, and by the end it's a bunch of bits making points he already made.

I realized a long time ago that when the professors say a work has historical importance, it will probably have no other kind. Robert Heinlein's long-lost first novel, *For Us, the Living*, has lotsa historical importance. It is, as all the reviews say, the work of an inexperienced writer who thinks that late H.G. Wells is a good model. On the other hand, one can see the incipient Heinlein in it, both in the quality of the writing and in old friends such as General Semantics, rolling roads, Coventry, Nehemiah Scudder, the idea that (as Bertrand Russell put it) even in the most civilized societies one can find traces of a monogamous instinct.... The new old element is Social Credit, and perhaps the biggest surprise is the intensity and openness of Heinlein's loathing for churches and banks. There is an explanatory afterword, useful among other reasons because nowadays Social Credit is mostly studied in Lit courses, as part of Ezra Pound's approach. (It probably needs to be added that the theory maintains that banks have too much money and power. Pound's false assumption that "the Jews" own the banks is as independent of the rest of Social Credit as the parallel postulate in geometry, and there is no reason to believe that Heinlein picked up that part.) There is also an intro in which Spider Robinson loves not wisely, but too well. Read it if you want to know more about Heinlein.

With a few exceptions, *For Us, the Living* predicted the immediate future about as well as Olaf Stapledon did in *Last and First Men* (he

said cruelly). One of the better ideas in it, however, was Fiorello La Guardia, the mayor of New York, moving up to the White House. Alyn Brodsky's *The Great Mayor* is a thorough portrait of the Little Flower, from his less famous career as a radical congressman to his later mayoral role, part folk figure who followed fire alarms and read the comics to the kiddies, but also a genuine reformer battling Robert Moses and other entrenched Forces of Evil.

Ed McBain is on a roll. His last couple of books were delightful, and *The Frumious Bandersnatch* may be even funnier. The main story is a kidnapping at a performance of a new song. As one may have guessed from the book title, the song is a setting of "Jabberwocky" to contemporary "music," and one of my favorite parts of the book is a televised discussion among Critical Studies types who assume the lyrics were newly written and tell us that "wabe" is racist because it's clearly the way a stereotype Black would say "wave," while "jubjub bird" is "an obvious code word for a man's Johnson." Also the Love Song of Oliver J. Weeks continues.

*Intertwined Lives*, by Lois Banner, tells us about two of the great anthropologists of the 1930s, Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict, studying allegedly primitive cultures while living in an allegedly advanced one that told them that, as happily married women who also enjoyed each other's bodies, they did not exist. Here's an example of the confusion:

[Havelock Ellis believed that girls sharing a bed] "unintentionally" generated "sexual irritation"[, defined] as "pudential turgescence with secretion of mucus and involuntary twitching of the neighboring muscles": he seems to describe an orgasm.

This book is a thorough account of the two of them, their theories, and their contemporaries.

*The Angry Young Men* is the latest book by literary historian and biographer Humphrey Carpenter, who has previously written about the Inklings, the Brideshead Generation, and Dennis Potter. The eponymous assemblage, like most literary Movements, was a group of divers writers by violence yoked together. Certainly, Kingsley Amis and Colin Wilson disliked each other (one could easily make a case for both) and had little writerly matter in

common. Philip Larkin tended not to be mentioned as one of the group at the time, though he and Amis were good friends and had similar attitudes (many deplorable). John Braine and John Wain blend indistinguishably in memory, which may be unfair to at least one. Colin Wilson is an inadvertently comic figure, and his sidekicks Stuart Holroyd and Bill Hopkins even more so. (I should say that I always considered Wilson an interesting and thoughtful writer, at least until he discovered the occult biz, which positively reinforced him for gullibility and poor fact checking. He had the misfortune to have his first book wildly overpraised by people who then repented and vowed never again to find any value in anything he wrote.) I found Carpenter's book good but disappointingly brief: an account of their few years in the spotlight, then a leap to a concluding chapter ("Angry Old Men") in which all but Wilson die.

*The Georgetown Ladies' Social Club ~~do-dah do-dah~~*, by C. David Heymann, is an account of the rich and powerful women of Washington, D.C., mostly wives of important men who themselves had the needed Alpha Female skills. Katherine Graham suffered horrendous abuse from her bipolar husband, then forgot to take the guns out of the house when he was in a severe depressive phase, and enjoyed the next thirty years as a rich and powerful widow. That's what I call a happy ending. (A similarly victimized friend of Graham's did likewise a few years later, with similar result.)

It is probably impossible to write a dull book about Richard Feynman, as evidenced by Jeffrey Mlodinow's *Feynman's Rainbow*. Mlodinow's look-at-me prose reminds me of a flasher displaying something that looks like a penis only smaller, but every so often he steps aside and lets us see Feynman, Murray Gell-Mann, and the whole CalTech scene.

*Caesar's Hours* is a charming memoir by 50s comedy star Sid Caesar. It includes growing up in Yonkers, the days of *Your Show of Shows* with Mel Brooks and equally crazy people as writers, a little about his battle with booze and pills, and this delightful putdown of Ann Coulter's hero:

McCarthy would hold up toilet paper and babble, sounding like a poor imitation of Ed Sullivan.

## Not forgotten

I met Sam Konkin back in the 70s. He may not have been the first doctrinaire libertarian I ever met, but he was the most. On the other hand, he was personally friendly and reasonable.

In 1969 Worldcon was held in St. Louis, and the same year, the libertarians gathered to create the Libertarian Party. Sam decided he loved the former and hated the latter.

He returned to New York City shortly thereafter and joined the New York University Science Fiction Society, an organization that eventually changed its name because it kept getting kicked out of New York University. He and Richard Friedman started apa-nu, an amateur press association that only now, about thirty years later, is yielding to the inevitable triumph of the Internet. I enjoyed both the club and the apa for many years.

Sam had moved to California by the time I got into NY fandom, but I enjoyed reading his zine *New Libertarian Notes*, disputing with him in apas, and meeting him at the occasional worldcon. Like many leftists, he considered the most dangerous enemies to be those fairly close to him, in his case the “partyarchs.” (I have read accounts of their factional disputes that closely parallel the battles amongst the Trotskyites before they became neoconservatives.) His thinking was so strongly two-valued that I suspected him of considering Ayn Rand soft on excluded middles. (On the other hand, he and I were both strongly influenced by C.S. Lewis while disagreeing with him on major issues.)

We’d been out of touch for years when I saw him at MilPhil in 2001. He’d heard that I no longer considered myself even approximately a libertarian. He said, without malice, “So you have abandoned the bitch goddess Reason?” We discussed politics briefly and went on to cheerier topics.

Sam died suddenly last month, and I will miss him. So long, Sam. May Absence of God send you to a Paradise where there are no grays.

The rap on John Gregory Dunne was that he didn’t write as well as his wife (Joan Didion) or sell as well as his brother (Dominick Dunne), but I have to say I preferred his writing to either’s. He was best known for his novels.

(*True Confessions* is the critical favorite, but I prefer *The Red, White, and Blue* and *Playland*.) I liked him even better as a nonfiction writer (*Harp, Crooning*), and a few days before he died I read and enjoyed his *NYRB* review of a new bio of Natalie Wood. He taught me some useful words and concepts, such as *laying pipe* as his image of the writing process, and *REMF* (rear echelon motherfucker—already standard unofficial military terminology) for those who loudly proclaim their support for Our Troops while making their job harder and more dangerous (as in REMFsfeld).

And good-bye to Dr. Humphry Osmond, the one who discovered, and coined the word for, psychedelic drugs; introduced them to Aldous Huxley; and used them successfully in the treatment of alcoholism. We all know what happened next: Tim Leary made the tactical error of publicizing them to one and all, instead of being an elitist and running the whole business through the medical profession. Teenagers picked it up, and many messed up their heads, though it could be argued that LSD caused more brain damage and insanity among those who didn’t take it. Remember all those scare stories, from drug-crazed hippies blinding themselves by staring into the sun to a generation born with nonstandard numbers of body parts because their parents had taken the nasty stuff? Dr. Osmond’s experiments have never been replicated because psychedelics wound up on the wrong side of the culturally drawn line between Medicine and Dope, and one can’t help thinking about the road not taken. Dr. Osmond also wrote the interesting psychological popularization *Understanding Understanding*.

The Bat Child, the pregnant mummy, those slashy lovers Saddam & Osama, and many others of dubious factuality are in mourning for Eddie Clontz (wouldn’t you know he’d have a name like that?), the editor of the *Weekly World News*, who died last month. He said he didn’t make the stuff up himself, but apparently he didn’t check any facts, either. He also appears to have to have been Ed Anger, the raging right-wing ranter who often was so over the top (the answer to child molesting is to arm our nation’s children) as to inspire suspicions of satire.