

## Nice Distinctions 8

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I saw my shrink in September for a new antidepressant shortly after I encouraged a Web site to do an improbable and unpleasant act to itself with a RotoRooter (an Imus image) over formatting issues. I decided that part of the problem could be situational depression over not enough paid work and the increasing realization that the only possible outcomes of the next forty years are a Singularity (for perhaps somewhat moderate values thereof) and something way below barbarism. Anyway, Goodbye Serzone, Hello Cymbalta.

In mid-November I saw my shrink again. I have a Hawthorn Effect with new medication, and I was getting at least that. I reported that I hadn't become despondent after the election, and he replied, "That's funny; most of us did." Actually, I reacted like this:

We lost, and now what do we do? First thing I'll do is sound like a liberal. Let's not assume that all the millions who voted for Bush are the bad guys. Some believed that the threat of terrorism is so serious, and Bush's response to it so much better than Kerry's, that it overcame any misgivings about Bush's economic policies, approach to rights and liberties, etc., as a matter of sheer survival. I think they're mistaken, but I might be.

That said, there a lot of people who like what is worst in Bush—the people who voted to deny marriage rights to gays in all eleven states where the question came up, the anti-abortionists who should not be called "fetus fans" because they are primarily concerned with the cost of sex being high enough (especially for women), the ones who cling to their racial and religious hates—and who don't

care what else Bush does as long as he panders to what is worst in them. The vast majority of them are not going to be really helped by Bush, and as far as I'm concerned they don't deserve any better. I just wish they weren't taking us along with them. I am tempted to go a bit beyond Richard Nixon: The average American is the *special* child in the family.

But then I remember that about 50% of the voting population voted against Bush, and they (we) are not going away either. (And the Republicans, as usual, depended on the white vote.) Let's not overestimate the extent to which we are "surrounded." Furthermore, while we can assume that Bush will make a mess, he may not make an irrevocable mess, and he may make one obvious to a majority before the next congressional elections or at least by 2008. It is not just in Greek plays that Hubris gets clobbered by Nemesis.

Let's also not take this red state/blue state thing too seriously. I'm from a blue state, but as the subtler maps show, we're actually a purple state, just a bit bluer than the others. Likewise I'm really from a purple city in a purple county, and—let's face it—I myself am a bit purple, as my soul contains a bit of red-state red along with the blue. I wouldn't be surprised if yours does too.

There are still organizations that will work against Bush. Let us all find at least one to do more for. I'm going to give a lot more support to the ACLU, which will have much to do in the next four years.

I'm still a science fiction type who believes that new ideas can save us (more so than electoral processes). Perhaps science will come up with an improvement on RU-486 that requires only a single dose to abort, and it can be bootlegged—as illegal as a vial of crack and as hard to obtain.

Meanwhile, keep living and keep loving. Write, organize, change minds one on one—whatever you do best. And remember what the great Yogi said: It ain't over till it's over.

Despite the utter lack of good calibration mechanisms, I believe the antidepressant is helping. I have hopes in the new year this zine has been procrastinated into. Kevin still has a good full-time job, Bernadette is still tutoring and writing, and I've been doing some copy-editing.

## **Cronyism**

I used to copy-edit and proofread for a company that publishes legal newsletters—advice to school superintendents, landlords, and medical professionals on changes in the laws that affect them. The newsletters were written/edited by lawyers, and the experience has kept me from the usual distaste for lawyers that our culture promotes, as the ones I worked with were intelligent, friendly, and reasonable. Of course, many of them were mommy-track lawyers, and few were actually **trial lawyers**, those rapacious sorts (such as John Edwards) who peddle their services to bad sports who want to get lots of money just because they lost limbs or loved ones to corporate negligence. (Could it be that the poor little corporations have trial lawyers of their own? Inquiring minds want to know.)

Anyway, for a while the office across the hall from me was occupied by a woman named Karyn Langhorne, who was one of the reasons for my positive view of the legal profession. She mentioned her literary aspirations, and that she had briefly had a play appearing off-Broadway. The other day, at Barnes & Noble, I happened to notice her first novel, a mass-market paperback called *A Personal Matter*. It appears to combine three categories: law, romance, and African American. I am not competent to determine whether it is a good book, but knowing her, I suspect that those who like that sort of thing will find this book a good example of it.

## **Robin Moore**

I saw a new book by Robin Moore today, which surprised me, as I thought he was dead (*hoped* would be too strong). If you're in a hurry, all you need to know about him is that *Soldier of Fortune* held a convention once and he got kicked out for being a racist asshole, but I'll tell you more.

He became famous in 1965, when he wrote *The Green Berets*. I was already dubious about the Vietnam War, but the Green Berets were the dark side of the approach that gave us the Peace Corps, VISTA, and *STAR TREK*, and I hoped would give the government what it wanted without sending in half a million troops. I bought the book but realized I would have been able to read it only if required. Cover boy Barry Sadler, who may have been an actual Green Beret as well as handsome, Caucasian, and tough-looking, used his

photogeneity to get a contract to record "The Ballad of the Green Berets." It went to the top of the charts, but its success did not transfer to records that required actual singing. Sadler went on to write, or have written for him, a number of mercenary (in several senses) novels. He lived what he wrote until he died what he wrote, at the hands of persons unknown in some tropical squalor.

Meanwhile, Robin Moore had another hit, with the book of *The French Connection*, then never really grasped the lightning again but kept trying. He was the "prose stylist" for a number of celebrities and warmongers; the only book of his I read was a novel authored (as opposed to written) by a former wife of football star Paul Hornung who still used his name (at least on the cover). It informed us that football players are mean, alcoholic, drug-addicted, homicidally violent, and worst of all gay. In the 80s came his disastrous speech at Fortunecon, and I had not heard from him since.

The new book is ghosted for a retired general. Like the work of Tom Clancy and Vince Flynn, it is set in that alternate reality where Donald Rumsfeld's military approaches work. Sumbitch hasn't changed a bit.

A TV show gave the name of Earthsea to a standard fantasy adventure, and those of its dark-skinned characters to a bunch of white folks. Ursula K. Le Guin remarked of its writer, "I can only admire Mr Halmi's imagination, but I wish he'd left mine alone." That and some premature scare talk about the upcoming adaptation of Phillip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* led to a dangerous vision:

## **Stranger in a Strange Land**

In this new film, faithfully based on the sci-fi book of the same name, Valentine Michael Smith (Justin Timberlake), the first Earthling born on Mars, is brought to Earth with no knowledge of his ancestral culture. Jubal Harshaw (Rush Limbaugh, writing his own lines) wittily explains humanity to him. He preaches a doctrine of heterosexuality, monogamy, and obedience, telling his followers when they question him, "You ain't God!" and promising that those who obey will gain superhuman Martian powers (in the next life). Groupies of both sexes offer themselves to him, but he keeps himself pure for his one true love (Ann Coulter). In the end, the Liberal Establishment kills him.

## Recent Reading

Whenever I feel Old, and thus supposed or entitled to be Cranky and/or Set In My Ways, I can remind myself that Frederik Pohl is still writing good sf, and he was banned from a worldcon before I was even born. His latest book, *The Boy Who Would Live Forever*, is an addition to his Heechee series, which began more than thirty years ago with *Gateway*. Pohl has essentially outlined the series by now, and the latest additions fill up some of the spaces in between. In this one, Boy Meets Girl on Venus when the Heechee were still mysterious, and thanks to a few relativistic time dilations, they are still around to enjoy a far-future posthumanity. In between, we meet some new characters, of whom the most charming is Marcus, a strategist AI who prefers to use his organizational skills as a gourmet chef. Nothing startlingly new here, but a pleasant experience from an Old Pro.

Pohl's fellow Grand Master Robert Silverberg has a new retrospective, *Phases of the Moon: Stories from Six Decades*. These 23 stories represent his entire career, from "Road to Nightfall," the first story that indicated its author's depths, to "With Caesar in the Underworld," published in the 21st century and included in *Roma Eterna*, his fix-up history of a world where the Roman Empire never ended because the Jews never got out of Egypt and so Christianity never arose. Here we get some of his best works: "To See the Invisible Man," which he fashioned from a throwaway line in Jorge Luis Borges's "Babylonian Lottery"; "Nightwings," with its lush descriptions of a far-future world and its Silverbergian theme of redemption; "Sundance," his answer to Alfred Bester's "Fondly Fahrenheit" that must keep shifting person and tense; "Schwartz between the Galaxies," in which the sense of wonder survives in a future that seems to deny it; one of his strange immortality tales, "Sailing to Byzantium"; and the utterly fascinating "Born with the Dead." Such a collection cannot be the ideal for every reader, but I will complain of only one inclusion and one omission. The presence is that of "Flies," which I never will like and which briefly persuaded me not to read anything more by its author; the absence, that of "In Entropy's Jaws," with its remarkable view of time and its "experimental"

style, like that of "Sundance" precisely as strange as it needs to be to tell its tale. You can't win them all.

The title *Blue Blood* is author Edward Conlon's little joke; it refers to his being a fourth-generation New York cop. In addition to that, he is a Harvard grad with a high level of literary skill. This memoir shines with wit and evocative detail, and manifests his love for his job. Perhaps his accounts of narcotics policing fall into the fallacy of imitative form, being as long and nearly eventless as that job itself, one that he still considers doable and worth doing. Still, there is much in this book that amuses, enlightens, and instructs.

*Men of Tomorrow*, by Gerard Jones, deals with the creators of the superhero comics. These were Jewish and Italian youths, growing up geeky in the early parts of the twentieth century, and Jones gives us a rich portrayal of these dreamers and the mixture of poverty, ambition, political activism, and organized crime they grew up in.

Frances Hodgson Burnett, who wrote in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, was known during her lifetime as the author of adult fiction and the wildly popular children's book *Little Lord Fauntleroy*. The former has been forgotten, and the latter survives mostly as an eponym, but two other Burnett children's books, *The Secret Garden* and *A Little Princess*, have returned to the spotlight. Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina's bio, *Frances Hodgson Burnett*, tells us gracefully of a remarkable person and a different time. One bit of evidence that our fairly recent ancestors were savages we could at best anthropologically condescend to is that Burnett bought a house with her royalties, but when she wanted to sell it, she had to do so through her husband because as a mere female she could not be expected to deal with such serious matters.

Jimmy Breslin's writings span a wide range of quality; one never knows whether his next column will be incisive or verbose. He is a performer, and he occasionally gets in the way of the story he's telling. He can be casual about facts; for instance, his bio of Damon Runyon includes a number of dubious unsubstantiated statements. At the end, there's a

big foreshadowing scene in which Runyon goes to a doctor to find out about his continuing sore throats. He recognizes the doctor from Babe Ruth's funeral, and it turns out that Runyon is soon to die of throat cancer, just as Ruth had.

Babe Ruth died in 1948. Damon Runyan died in 1946.

Breslin's latest book, *The Church That Forgot Christ*, shows all aspects of his writing. He has been a Roman Catholic all his life, and there is much about the church that he loves, but he has also been critical of the church for not doing enough for his view of social justice. Now the scandal of many Catholic priests abusing children and being transferred to other parishes instead of punished has tipped the scales. Breslin is angry, and he has written an angry book.

Whether it's a good book is another question. Certainly the anger is justified, and often well expressed and documented, but there's a lot of The Jimmy Breslin Show Starring Jimmy Breslin (as in his discussion of plans to make himself bishop of a new church), and there are questions about the accuracy of some of his most striking scenes.

The story is told far better, with more detail, in *Our Fathers*, by David France, a full and complex account of the priestly sex abuse scandals in Boston. We get a close-up look at the victims and the feelings of shame and betrayal that they have carried from childhood. We can almost sympathize with Cardinal Bernard Law, who tried to protect the organization for which he was responsible, finally realizing the enormity of what the Church and its representatives had done.

P.G. Wodehouse was one of the great literary hedgehogs. The one thing he knew how to do very well and did repeatedly was to construct a particular kind of intricate fictional machinery that delighted many readers of all sorts. It has been noted before that one way in which he was able to achieve his results was the ability to avoid politics, sex, and many of the other difficulties grown-ups have to deal with, in his life as well as his fiction. Such matters caught up with him once, devastatingly, when he was caught in occupied France at the beginning of World War II and gave some radio broadcasts in which he treated internment as lightly as he usually treated things. This in some ways gave aid and comfort to the enemy, and it took his

native Great Britain a long time to forgive. (He was knighted almost thirty years later, shortly before his death. He had been living in the USA in the intervening time and did not return.) Robert J. McCrum's *Wodehouse: A Life* is a good, thorough account.

Evelyn Waugh, who loved Wodehouse's books, was unable to take refuge in their past or timeless fantasy world. He faced the present and didn't like it much, but he made art out of his distaste. Not unfairly described as "nasty, British, and short," Waugh was disagreeable and sometimes actually cruel, but for one (me, for instance) who could read him without meeting him, he was a source of great pleasure. He once said that the only thing that kept him human at all was his submission to the dictates of the Roman Catholic Church; I see no reason to doubt that. *Evelyn Waugh*, by Selina Hastings, tells his story with a wit appropriate to its subject. It may say something about me, as well as the book, that my favorite bit is Hastings's conjecture that the well-known sexual failure of his first marriage occurred because all his previous partners had required little foreplay, being male.

David Niven's autobio, *The Moon's a Balloon*, was a delightful book. Graham Lord's *Niv* offers much mere factual correction, and an update, and leaves much of his charm intact. (Niven was a poster boy for the heartbreak of satyriasis, but many of his partners left the encounters physically and emotionally satisfied.) The book is an authorized biography, and it tells us that his children bore up well but his second and final wife was somewhere beyond Bitch, near Philip K. Dick Woman.

Every week Michael Dirda writes a book column for *The Washington Post Book World*, and it's almost always wonderful. Dirda is a great appreciator, at his best talking about the pleasures of a given book. He knows that the full range of literary quality can be found in category fiction; he is on record that John Sladek was a genius who should have become famous. He has read a lot and can relate the book at hand to what has preceded and followed it. His new collection, *Bound to Please*, has all of that. [Small complaints: no index, no full-length Gene Wolfe review (he has since done a marvelous front-page discussion

of *The Knight*.)] The pleasure isn't over; I now have a list of books to look up.

*The Jerk on the Cell Phone* [Barbara Pachter & Susan Magee] is an appealing title, but can one make a whole book out of it? Of course not. What we have is 180 thick pages, many blank or partial, in which everything that can intelligently be said about the problem is said, and the other three quarters of the book is standard gags (a 12-step program complete with questionnaire; have we seen one of those before?) and assorted filler. What makes it cheap at half the price (the one I paid—half the cover price) is the Horrible Examples. My fave is the doctor standing on a restaurant line audibly phoning in a Viagra prescription, complete with patient's name.

There was an sf tradition, going back at least to Isaac Asimov and Frederik Pohl, of writers starting out in the fanzines. In the 50s Robert Silverberg and Harlan Ellison followed in their footsteps. For a while, that approach seemed to be dying, but we're starting to get a revival of it in electronic venues. One example is World Fantasy Award winner Jo Walton, whose wit, knowledge, and eloquence were first noticed in the rasf\* newsgroups, by her editor among others.

I first encountered Charles Stross on the Extropians mailing list, and I have since seen him all over cyberspace. (For that matter, Ulrika O'Brien managed to get both Walton and Stross in her zine, *The Widening Gyre*, before they hit the big time.) He too has moved into first-rate fiction. *The Atrocity Archives* starts with a marvelous concept: Alan Turing Knew Too Much, developing equations that lead to Strange Dimensions of the sort Lovecraft wrote about. What follows is a skilled mix of eldritch horror, comedy of bureaucracy, and wise-ass narration. I enjoyed it something fierce. *The Family Trade* is a crosstime adventure (H. Beam Piper and Roger Zelazny are invoked in the advertising) that follows a strong and likable female protagonist who is taken to alternate worlds. My sole complaint is that *The Family Trade* is the first of a multi-book series and is paced accordingly.

Speaking of concepts, Eileen Gunn's "Stable Strategies for Middle Management" is one of the all-time great high-concept stories. Now she has a story collection, *Stable Strategies*

and *Others*. Nothing else in the book meets that high standard, but tales like "Fellow Americans" (featuring The Tricky Dick Show) present a charmingly twisted mind.

Wanda Sykes is a very funny black woman who says things like, "If you're white and wanna be my friend, please have some other black friends. I don't have the energy for breaking people in." Now we have *Yeah, I Said It*, a book of her wit and malice. I loved it.

In *Schild's Ladder*, Greg Egan does what he does best: mind-blowing physics implying mind-blowing metaphysics. A test of a minor aspect of the established Grand Universal Theory turns out to reveal another universe with a Theory of its own and perhaps more of something ours has too little of.

A Paul Di Filippo novel at a mere standard-trade-paperback price is good news in itself, and *Fuzzy Dice* is a brilliant one. I consider it a descendant of Robert Sheckley's best book, *Dimension of Miracles*—a tour of possible worlds, in this case those of cellular automata, chaos theory, and morphogenic theory, among others. Rudy Rucker (another influence) offers an explanatory introduction, complete with chart in the manner of Stuart Gilbert. This is what I've always read sf for: wondrous conceptual strangeness, presented with wit.

Last year, I read a British sf novel called *Polystom*, by Adam Roberts. It's a marvelous book, beginning in a rococo world with non-standard physics/astronomy and a 19th-century culture (with the marginal characters a bit more foregrounded) and changing in the manner of an Escher painting (I won't say which one). Fantastic. It has not precisely been published in America, but an importer has brought in British mass market paperbacks (at American mass market paperback prices) of that and three other Roberts novels (*Stone*, which I also recommend, and *Salt and On*, which I haven't read yet). Buy them.

Another economic miracle: Damien Broderick's best critical book, *x, y, z, t: Dimensions of Science Fiction*, is also his first to be available at a civilized price. I highly recommend it, even though he disses some of my faves (such as Silverberg and Heinlein).

A recent study has shown that abstinence “education” is full of untruths. The Bush administration has demanded the right to use testimony obtained by torture. Lying to children and torturing people to get information have two things in common: They’re morally repulsive, and they don’t do what you want them to. That doesn’t leave much.

### ***Nasty, Brutish, & Short***

Dualism is the opposite of all that is good and true.

I am not patient enough to get my endorphins from exercise or BDSM.

What do you call it when a Catholic priest has sex with an adult woman?

Progress.

Northwest Airlines, which lost a bag of ours and took a week to get back to us, now calls itself NWA. Presumably that stands for Nitwits With Attitude

Fact: a musician named John Balance drunkenly fell on his head and died.

Art is superversive—Tom Simon

Bush’s ownership society is libertarianism without the good parts.

Insult: I see that you have brought a gun to an intellectual knife fight, but you’re not even successfully squirting anyone.

Tom Wolfe’s new book is a lengthy complaint that college students are casual about sex and serious about offending minorities, instead of the other way around.

Actual news story: A psychiatrist who police say smeared excrement on dollar bills used to pay a parking ticket has been charged with harassment of a public official.

When I was eight years old, I wanted to be a baseball player, then a congressman. Now I am grateful to the merciful fate that kept me from being Jim Bunning.

Livejournal quizzes tend to be made up by people who think they don’t need a spell checker unless they want to turn someone into a toad

Sports headline of the year (from Yahoo):  
**Bengals: Johnson Up for Levitra Honor.**  
Runner-up: **Hand Pulls Groin.**

### ***Not Forgotten***

**Jacques Derrida** has been phallogocentrically stigmatized as “dead” under the hegemonic white male definition.

**Victoria Snelgrove** was an innocent victim of police excess during the Red Sox pennant celebration. Abbie Hoffman once said the straight culture has an Altamont after every World Series. This time it had one quarter of a Kent State.

Football great **Reggie White** died suddenly and young, apparently from complications of sleep apnea. White was one of the greatest pass rushers ever, on religious grounds he did much in the way of Cardinal Works of Mercy, and he was a Seeker, whose intellectual curiosity led him in his last years to stop going to church and start studying Hebrew. I trust that St. Peter will greet him with a great big kiss, to start him on his education in one thing he always got wrong in this life.

**Susan Sontag** said some great things and some really dumb things, and many things in between. In what I consider her best book, *Illness as Metaphor*, she wryly remarked on the Demiurge’s quaint sense of humor (she didn’t phrase it that way) in giving her cancer shortly after she proclaimed the white race “the cancer of the world.” The mass media instruct us to remember her at her worst. A few sympathetic statements about the USSR are recalled better than her realization, years before the Soviet Empire collapsed, that it was an evil one. She made the reasonable statement that the 9/11 perps were not cowards and was treated as if she had called them good guys. Conservatives proclaim that “Notes on Camp” was some sort of Homintern plot to sneak perverse ideas into our artistic culture, and they say that as if there were something wrong with it.

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We’re a little late, folks. See you in March.

Excelsior,

Arthur