

Nice Distinctions 6

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The big news here is that an otherwise respectable company has hired Kevin to a real fulltime job, which is cause for rejoicing.

The forces of propriety and decency are once again in the ascendant. The Federal Communications Commission, as usual protecting us whether we want to be protected or not, has cracked down on notorious sewer-mouth Howard Stern. (Perhaps for saying, "one-term president," but let that pass.) Besides, there is censorware, often more meticulous than the most obsessed wowser. (Sorry, Ms. Matsushita.) Once more, evasive tactics are called for. Gore Vidal and Robert Anton Wilson suggested using the names of the smutstompers themselves. It's tempting to say something like, "His idea of a good time is to get down on his knees and phelps a dozen sailors," but the names will become obsolete, and it's unfair to others who share them.

Eric Idle has a solution: He has written "The FCC Song," which not only violates their rules repeatedly, but suggested (at least to me) a new spelling for one of the words that offend them most. As far as I am concerned, John Ashcroft can go FCC himself.

Heather, or Riley's Daughter in Space

Sittin' in the Spacers' Bar
Hearin' tales o' blood and slaughter,
Suddenly the thought come into me head,
I'd like to shag old Ry-Leh's daughter
CHORUS: Giddy-eye-eh, giddy-eye-eh,
Giddy-eye-eh for the three-eyed Ry-Leh
Giddy-eye-eh, giddy-eye-eh, giddy-eye-eh
Très bon
Dr. Sheldon called me in,
Said I need a new perspective,
But I did not heed her words.
I said, "Screw the Prime Directive."
Took her out behind the ship,
Shagged and shagged till I damn near stove'er
Not one word to me she said,

But laughed like hell when it was over.
I'm a Terran, strong and true
I know I'm tougher than the others.
I didn't stop to figure out
When they said she had two mothers.
Then she changed before my eyes,
Raised a pseudopod behind me,
Held me so I could not move,
Stuck it where it would not blind me.
Little aliens in my gut
Make me curse the three-eyed Ry-Leh
But I hear I can be cured:
Now I am prochoice entirely.
Giddy-eye-eh, giddy-eye-eh,
Giddy-eye-eh for the three-eyed Ry-Leh
Giddy-eye-eh, giddy-eye-eh, giddy-eye-eh
God damn.

NOTES: A.N. Wilson, discussing the bawdy-song sessions C.S. Lewis ran, indicated that one of the faves was "Riley's Daughter" or a derivative. In the original the narrator "grabbed old Riley by the hair/Stuck his head in a pail of water/Rammed his pistols up his arse/Damned sight harder than I shagged his daughter." I considered that an insufficient peripeteia.

Dr. Sheldon has written on the topic of xenoeroticism under her own name and as James Tiptree jr.

I chose the title because the female protagonist has two mommies.

ICFA Report

This year all three of us made it to the International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts. (The three of us being Bernadette Bosky, my spouse; Kevin Maroney, my cohusband; and me, he said, taking a small infodump.) As usual we enjoyed good company and intellectual stimulation.

First of all I should mention Donna Hooley, who was there despite having undergone the amputation of half of one leg a bit earlier. She chaired a poetry reading and, as promised, showed up for the banquet dressed as a pirate (though technically, as she pointed out, she has a prosthesis, rather than a peg leg). Good for you, Donna!

The very first session was my favorite kind-on written mid-20th century sf. Samantha Marsh showed us some remarkably squamous old pulp illos to demonstrate how the body-invasion themes of fifties horror movies and other pomo faves had been presaged in 30s sf. A paper written by Amelia Beamer and Aimee Sutherland showed how Astounding's multiplicity of appeals (particularly cerebral) helped it survive the 50s collapse of the pulp market when Planet Stories didn't. David M. Higgins talked about "Revolution in the Head": the inward turning of Sixties sf, as the skies seemed to be closing.

First thing Thursday morning I went to one of the sessions on fanfic culture, as I am fascinating by the idea of readers and viewers interacting with art and reshaping it, rather than

passively slurping it up. I enjoyed the discussion, as usual. My favorite line was when one panelist said she felt a bit weird telling people how much time she spent reading and writing porn, and a voice from the audience remarked, "We're women. It's erotica."

At lunch we were addressed by our GoH, Cuban writer Daina Chaviano, a fantasy and slipstream writer whose refusal to write realistic literature about approved realities made it necessary for her to leave her native land. (Her image of a race of dinosaurs that escaped into other dimensions, rather than becoming extinct, was particularly troublesome.) Her speech inspired me to attend a later session on her work, which makes me hope more of it is translated soon. Yolanda Molina-Gavilán discussed "The Annunciation," in which the Virgin Mary is impregnated by a space alien-hardly a new novum (in Dr. Suvin's phrase), but one that she has presented with stunning imagery. Andrea Bell discussed Chaviano's latest series, based on the image from *The Symposium of the Other Half*. The female protagonist started out joined to, not a man (as the version many of us read first maintained was the only possibility) or a woman (as the unexpurgated version suggested), but two people. Imagine that.

After lunch it was time to hear Kenneth Jurkiewicz's paper with the irresistible title of "SpongeBob Agonistes." Some say SpongeBob is popular because his show is clean (appropriate for a sponge); Jurkiewicz called him "PeeWee Herman without the creep factor, Jerry Lewis without the Jerry Lewis factor." The paper discussed how everyone in Bikini Bottoms is obsessive-compulsive, from the protagonist's deranged enthusiasm about his work to Mr. Krab's equally mad pursuit of money, and pointed out how the seemingly dimwitted, but remarkably passive-aggressive, Patrick spreads chaos wherever he goes. I was going to attend a paper on the work of Thomas King, author of the delightful Coyote tale *Green Grass, Running Water*, but no doubt emulating its trickster subject, the paper disappeared from the schedule.

This was the international International Conference, so our Scholar GoH was also from a non-Anglophone background. Editor and translator Marcial Souto told us he grew up in a house with one book, which he read over and over again even though its beginning and end had fallen off and were lost. That's a marvelous image of life, and it may even have happened. He discussed the joys and problems of translating: being "the most attentive reader the book will ever have" and knowing that even in the least of books there is something to lose.

Saturday was our family's scheduled Big Day. Bernadette was supposed to chair an early session, but she was suffering acute periodic female distress, so Kevin chaired instead. He did not give a convincing imitation of Bernadette, but other than that had no problems. Glenda Guest, an Australian, discussed the role of magical realism in her nation's fiction-not much, apparently, at least in the Latin American sense, but Patrick White and others have led Australia away from strictly realistic texts, and as more Aboriginal traditions are incorporated in the national culture, there will no doubt be more magical realism. Kim Selling talked about how nature has been socially constructed, from Tolkien's romantic fantasy (which grew in popularity step by step with the environmentalist movement) to China Mieville's *The Scar*, in which machines can bleed. Sondra Swift's papers are always fascinating, complex, and perceptive, and this year's-on Dionysian aspects of Elizabeth Hand's writing-was no exception.

Then I took (or perhaps became) the Chair. The title of the session was "Elizabeth Hand, Peter Straub, Christopher Priest, and Roger Zelazny." An inauspicious beginning: Sessions are supposed to have a unifying theme, and here was a three-paper session with four names in the title. But it was all good after that. Bernadette discussed sexual and moral ambiguity in Elizabeth Hand's *Waking the Moon*, with its conspiratorial and no doubt sinister

male order of Benandanti confronting a matriarchy nowhere near as warm and fuzzy as some would like them to be. Afterwards, Liz Hand expressed a feeling of having been understood. Farah Mendlesohn talked about how Straub's *_lost boy lost girl_* and Priest's *_The Separation_* violate not only the borders between genres but also those between creator and creation.

Actually, there had been an attempt to bring more unity to the session. Through the inevitable workings of large organizations, another paper on Elizabeth Hand had been scheduled for a different session at the same time, so we made an effort to trade for it. In sports they say, "Sometimes the best trades are the ones you don't make." The person who was going to deliver the other Hand paper didn't show up, and it was just as well because Norman Percy presented a most enlightening discussion of Zelazny's *_Wizard World_* from a Jungian point of view. Jung is out of fashion these days, for good reasons (he was very much a 20th-century DWEM) and bad (his picture of the mind does not match the current materialist episteme). Norman Percy demonstrated that Jung still has much to offer.

The Writers Teaching Writing and Young Adult panels were fun, but my note-taking hand had gotten tired. My favorite line in the latter came from Chip Sullivan: "What's Harry Potter going to do with his degree in magic? He can't use it; it's like a degree in English."

The banquet was pleasurable; we sat with Peter and Susan Straub. (It's about time that Twayne did a Peter Straub volume, and Bernadette is the person to do it.) The awards session was again operated on the new Brevity Is the Soul of Wit assumption, and that worked too.

There are always a few things that don't fit in a report. Let's see: the pleasure of once again seeing Jennifer Stevenson, whose first novel *_Trash Sex Magic_* will be out around now from Small Beer Press. I encourage you to read it, if for some reason the title hasn't presold you. Meeting Kij Johnson, whose Japanese fantasies sound fascinating. Bill Senior, as always doing yeoman work and enlivening the proceedings with a few pungent remarks. Lunch with Kelly Sears Smith. Probably remarkable papers when I had to be elsewhere, from Leonard Heldreth on Dennis Potter to Sharon King on the Ghost in the Latrine. Irma Hirsjarven coming here from Finland to show us that fandom as well as fiction is international. And more more more.

Next year it's going to be even better, with Rudy Rucker and Damien Broderick as the main guests. I'll be there.

Nasty, Brutish, and Short

"The reason, I suspect, that basketball appeals to the Hebrew with his Oriental background is that the game places a premium on an alert, scheming mind, flashy trickiness, artful dodging and general smart aleckness."-Paul Gallico, beloved 30s sportswriter

All governments bugger the citizens, but liberals use lube.

Jim Morrison's main accomplishment was packing the whole Elvis collapse-sex god to fat junkie to corpse-into less than five years.

Contrary to the rumors, Andy Kaufman, like Francisco Franco, is still dead. Pity. It would have nailed down forever his claim to Unfunniest Joke of All Time, an accomplishment he pursued throughout his career.

Recent Reading

Spinning Blues into Gold, by Nadine Cohodas, is the story of the Chess family and their eponymous record label, which gave the world Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Sonny Boy Williamson (the second one), and Chuck Berry, among others, with much historical detail. Apparently the story of Muddy Waters painting the company offices because his records weren't earning out occurred only in the augmented imagination of Keith Richards.

The Poison Master, by Liz Williams, begins with the historical magician John Dee, back in the 16th century, and alternates his story with that of a woman named Alivet Dee, mixing up potions on the world of Latent Emanation. I guess if you want to be fussy, it isn't science fiction, but I liked it.

The idea of a _Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction_ strikes fear into the heart of anyone sympathetic to the idea of bringing science fiction back to the gutter where it belongs, which I sometimes am. Cambridge, however, was smart enough to turn the task over to Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn, who actually love sf. The individual essays range from competent to excellent. One I found particularly enlightening was Ken MacLeod's discussion of politics and sf, which points out that politics is about process and compromise, and thus the problem-solving sort of sf (Asimov and Heinlein, the kind I always loved and still do) is diametrically opposed to it. I also liked Farah Mendlesohn's tour de force intro, which uses _Schild's Ladder_, by Greg Egan, as a benchmark for sf theories; Damien Broderick on the New Wave and Andy Duncan on alternate history are also first-rate, but it's all good.

Dominic Seabrook, _Eugene McCarthy_. McCarthy in 1968 was the presidential campaign I was most enthusiastic about. I loved his intellect, his calm (especially vis-a-vis Bobby Kennedy's passionate intensity, which I found downright scary), and of course his opposition to the stupid war we'd blundered into. In retrospect, I can also see that I identified with aspects that were not as good: laziness, distance, condescension to the masses, and actual distaste for politics (see discussion of Ken MacLeod above). Seabrook tells McCarthy's whole story, from his days as a Catholic leftist in the 50s (which I would have considered an oxymoron at the time). Apparently, he had a history of losing interest after a while-as a novitiate monk, as a professor, and as a member of the House of Representatives-and he was getting bored with being a senator when 1968 rolled around. Seabrook doesn't like McCarthy, though it's minor annoyance, rather than the torrents of hate that drive Christopher Hitchens on the Clintons or James Atlas on Saul Bellow, and he does concede that McCarthy knew that LBJ had to be opposed, saw that he could not pass the cup, and took on the duty anyway. (By the way, McCarthy is still alive. He's in a retirement home, but he definitely remains compos mentis: He describes Bush as a "pretender" and the mess in Iraq as a "faith-based war.")

Years ago my friend Martin Morse Wooster wrote up a short list of writers worth reading. It included Robert Anton Wilson, a couple of other good ones whose names escape me, and Clive

James. Goodness by association inspired me to track down something written by James, which is not the easiest thing to do in the United States. Now we have a big nonfiction retrospective entitled *_As of This Writing_*, and I see what Martin was talking about.

James wrote a famous essay in praise of Edmund Wilson (collected here), and James too has broad-ranging interests, from Pier Paolo Pasolini to Richard Nixon (as memoirist) to Theodore Roethke. He has 45 excellent pages on Philip Larkin, who is proverbially difficult to discuss in a critical manner because his work is simultaneously great and accessible, and he writes well on James Agee, that legendary bearer of the burden of a great potential. Flaws? He is condescending to genre and goes along with Ray Monk's hatchet job on Bertrand Russell because of his own distaste for the subject. Still, it's mostly good, and often he writes like this (on Gore Vidal):

Speaking about Hollywood, he is an outsider who delights to pose as an insider.
Speaking about the ruling class, he is an insider who delights to pose as an outsider.

When I was born, it seemed unlikely that a human being would ever run the mile in under four minutes. When I was twelve, it was done--by a British doctor, of all things. Now the record is somewhere in the 3.40s. *_The Perfect Mile_*, by Neal Bascomb, describes the three men involved in the chase for the four-minute mile: Roger Bannister, the doctor who did it first; John Landy, an Australian who beat Bannister's time; and Wes Santee, from Kansas, who should have had the chance to race them, but never got it because of the typical piggishness and stupidity of those attempting to enforce the grand oxymoron known as big-time amateur sports. (David Dyer-Bennet informs me that there is now evidence that the feat was performed in the 17th or 18th century, but was forgotten.)

Gerald Eskenazi's remembers *_A Sportswriter's Life_*. Much of his work was done for The New York Times, and he details the problems thereof, such as writing about a punter whose bad kick lost a game and who was told by his coach, "I can fart farther than you can kick." What was officially fit to print was, "I can spit farther than you can kick," and someone wrote a journalism review meta-article on the choice of words. It's a pleasant book, with some good stories, but way too rambling, especially for a university press book.

John Barth, like Vladimir Nabokov, is a notoriously self-indulgent writer, but as far as I am concerned, both selves are worth indulging. I first encountered Barth's writing forty years ago with *_End of the Road_*, a conventional novel that featured an abortion (then a shocking concept) and the phrase, "No, I'm not just a bastard. I'm also a bastard," which I found a gateway to the whole Korzybskian/constructivist idea that whatever you say it is, it isn't. From there he went on to two massive works, the wondrous mock-historical *_The Sot-Weed Factor_* and a speculative fiction about the University as Universe, *_Giles Goat-Boy_*. At this point, he began to face the problems, or perhaps I am supposed to say the problematics, that convinced some postmodernists of the impossibility of fiction, but like Marshall McLuhan with paranoia, he went through it and came out the other side, with *_Letters_*, in which he interacts with the characters of his previous works, followed by a series of excellent novels (my favorite is *_The Tidewater Tales_*) that tell stories while being, as they say, aware of the status of their discourse.

The latest is *_The Book of Ten Nights and a Night_* (obvious reference to Scheherezade, who fascinates Barth as much as Tarzan fascinates Philip José Farmer), in which a narrator who resembles, without being, his creator spends the 11 nights after 9/11 telling tales to

his mechanical muse Wysiwyg. The stories themselves were created earlier, but Barth cunningly fits them into this frame, with each obeying new restrictions set by the muse in response to the previous ones. For me the stories get better and better, climaxing with "9999," whose protagonist is fascinated by the patterns in dates (as I am) and "Click," a multilevel tale of an Expediter and an Enhancer.

The New York Review of Books is doing Good Things. Their latest issue devotes about half its articles to savaging the Bush gang. (Some will say they are returning to their Sixties youth and the issue with the Molotov cocktail on the cover, but of course this time it's the other side who are the dangerous radicals.) They also have a book-publishing program, mostly devoted to bringing back the unjustly out of print. For instance, they recently published a new edition of John Horne Burns's *The Gallery*, one of the best WWII novels. One of their latest is Murray Kempton's *Part of Our Time: Some Ruins and Monuments of the Thirties*.

Kempton was one of the great nonfiction prose stylists of the past fifty years. (Well, Tom Wolfe accuses him of "British-essayist mannerisms," a charge I take as seriously as the accusation that John Kerry appears French.) For instance, he said of Cecil B. De Mille's *The Ten Commandments*, "One does not attend this movie; one enlists in it." He was a compassionate man who believed that each of us is alone on this earth and we should do what we can to make the passage easy for others, and eloquently invoked those values. (America Comes of Middle Age begins with a series of brilliantly cold summaries of the efforts of McCarthyites to defend freedom by such heroic measures as denying pension benefits to eighty-year-old subversives.) *Part of Our Time* is a series of loving and forgiving character studies of Alger Hiss, Whittaker Chambers, the Hollywood Ten, and others who followed the revolutionary dreams of the 30s. His excellent collection, *Rebellions, Perversities and Main Events* is, alas, out of print, but grab it if you see a used copy.

There's a marvelous new nonfiction book by Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Wave in the Mind*. The title is a Virginia Woolf phrase about the rhythms of writing, and that sets the theme for most of the book. There is a chapter on prose rhythm that seems so practical and analytical that I skipped it for fear of Centipede Syndrome, but I very much enjoyed "Collectors, Rhymesters, and Drummers" and "Telling Is Listening." Other high points include an essay on Borges and his fantasy anthology, in which she mentions how she consults her two "aunties" the I Ching and the OED, and her discussions of Tolkien and Cordwainer Smith. (Minor complaint-as Dave Langford says, the acid drop that makes the whole review sweeter-the Smith essay concludes with her original remark that his works were likely to be out of print. As you know, Bob, they have now achieved the permanence of NESFA publication.)

Not Forgotten

Maimu Alber (1953-2004)

I had my last drug relapse in 1992. A couple of years later, I got on the internet and found a mailing list for NA members, and by far the most interesting person on it was Maimu (pronounced my-moo; we did cow jokes), a pagan polyamorist with a sick sense of humor. She eventually left the NA list to start a Pagan recovery list because she found NA's imagery too monotheistic, and I immediately joined that, finding her the most interesting person there, too.

She went back to her ancestral Estonia to be a teacher, but that didn't work out. We were out of touch the last few years, and now I learn from the NA list that she has just had a fatal heart attack.

Also

We lost two British gentlemen of taste and charm-Alistair Cooke and Peter Ustinov- and two of the Watergate good guys: Archibald Cox and Sam Dash. Pat Tillman turned his back on a successful football career to fight for what he believed in. He was killed by those who were supposed to be on his side, which is all too symbolic. David Dellinger had the opposite view of war and went to jail for it, first in World War II and then as the elder statesman of the Chicago 8 7 10, memorably summarizing their farcical trial with a "barnyard epithet" (as J. Anthony Lukas put it in his own encounter with Times rules).

Vote for the Bore-It's Important

The Onion has it right as usual: A recent story is entitled "Many Americans Still Unsure Whom to Vote Against." I am not.

Dayenu. The mess in Iraq would be sufficient unto itself to make me vote against Bush. Remember him in front of the Mission Accomplished sign, wearing his military costume? (Technically, George Bush is not a DESERTER.) Not only was the mission not accomplished, but we face two huge embarrassments: Abu Ghraib, where civilians from the prison-industrial complex, convinced that the Geneva convention had been "rendered quaint," set up a system of tortures that have turned the world's collective stomach, and Ahmad Chalabi, who, on the face of it, could not be trusted by anyone not desperate to be agreed with, and now appears to have been an agent for Iran. (Remember the Axis of Evil?) It could turn out that the difference between Richard Perle and Alger Hiss is that Hiss gave away less useful information.

But wait! There's more! Let's not forget the tax cuts for the rich, turning America into more of a third-world country while impressing the innumerate masses with the decrease in "average" tax. The eventual purpose of that is "starving the beast," a technical term for keeping the government from performing cardinal works of mercy while maintaining the Wars on Some Drugs and Some Terrorism full-blast. There's the Bush gang's faith-based "science," in which, despite mere empirical fact, abortion causes breast cancer, there's no such thing as repetitive stress injury, and mercury in the water doesn't cause brain damage if those who dump it there make large enough campaign contributions. And of course John Ashcroft, Anointed Defender of the Faith, protecting us from bare-boobed statues and swarthy foreigners.

The alternative is voting for John Kerry, and since he will not turn into a giant toad or something, I believe the choice is obvious.

Excelsior,
Arthur