

Nice Distinctions 14

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There was a quiz going around recently as to how "fortunate" one is, measured in material things. One of the ways in which I am fortunate is that my parents taught me not to want expensive show-off crap, so the test says I'm not fortunate. I know better.

I have my health. I went back for a scheduled appointment with the retina specialist I visited when I had persistent floaters in my left eye. After the examination (hideous, but finite), he pronounced me cured. I see my regular ophthalmologist for my regular checkup in the fall, but I don't have to see him again unless I get new symptoms. My blood sugar remains low, and I seem generally healthy. At Narcotics Anonymous meetings people remark that I have lost weight. I explain that I had no choice, having had to start exercising and being significantly more nutritionally correct.

Work has been going well. I've been getting more copy-editing assignments, including a couple of books that were worth reading even if not paid to.

And most of all, I have Bernadette and Kevin, both of whom are likewise working and being paid well.

I picked up the phone and the first thing I heard was, "This is a courtesy call." I expected the caller to try to sell me

something, but it turned out to be the people who repaired one of our cars asking if the work was OK. (It is.) But it won't really be the Last Days till I'm told that I'm "preapproved" for something I actually want.

I consider *Naked Lunch* one of the great novels of the twentieth century, although its author, William S. Burroughs, hated two of the things I love the most: words and women. I suppose his description of language as a mind-controlling alien virus works only as metaphor, but if it is literally true, then I for one welcome our new viral masters.

O.D.D.

A while back, I ran into a bit of classical therapeutic euphemism. A kid who was caught bringing guns and ammo to school was said to suffer from "oppositional defiant disorder." Of course psychological terminology is often a tension between terms calming enough not to stigmatize and terms pathological enough to be used by defense counsel, and I suppose I shouldn't complain unless people are excused for harmful behavior because of such a diagnosis.

I've never brought weapons to school, but I might as well admit that I have oppositional defiant disorder. Of course I hate the Bush gang, who should be opposed and defied, but I also feel that way about legitimate authority, about "society" and the environment. A funny list of possible reasons for buying an SUV included, along with the obvious references to overcompensation, "Tired of being the environment's bitch." I don't have or want an SUV, but I know the feeling. For one thing, I hate the extent to which humans are prisoners of our reproductive nature and think of those who want to roll back the progress we've made as traitors. One reason I am pathologically vanilla is that I don't even want to play at submission.

But maybe I don't really have O.D.D.. I mentioned it in livejournal, and someone suggested that O.D.D. applies only to those who can't help opposing and defying, like kids who scream all the time in school and adults who buy SUVs they don't need.

Texts

Regina Barreca, *Too Much of a Good Thing Is Wonderful*

The backcover blurb calls this book "witty and wise," which usually means I won't like it, but I've enjoyed some of her other writing, so I bought it, and I'm glad I did. It includes a lot of literally mundane detail (as the W&W epithet suggests), but there's also a lot of incisive, well-expressed stuff about people. Her chapter on women's revenge is called "How Do You Solve a Problem like Medea?"

Pickpocket & Saint Dept.: I have never been able to read a book without noticing spelling, grammar, etc., and now that I'm a copy-editor I notice production details. This one not only should have been copy-edited, fact-checked, and proofread better, but it is the first book I have seen from a "real" print-before-demand publisher that doesn't use italics.

Edward Field, *The Man Who Would Marry Susan Sontag*

Enjoyable memoir by a gay beatnik poet. I liked the gossip about, among others, Paul & Jane Bowles, and the eponymous Alfred Chester, who overcame the proverbial burden of a great potential to the extent of writing a couple of short story collections and an Olympia Press book.

William Poundstone *Fortune's Formula*

Ambrose Bierce remarked that those who engage in the business known as gambling are despised by those who engage in the gambling known as business. Whatever differences there are between the two, they appear to be governed by similar mathematics. One person who

noticed this similarity and profited therefrom was Claude Shannon, the creator of information theory. Another, Edward Thorp, figured out how to gain an edge at blackjack, made money, and wrote *Beat the Dealer*, then succeeded with the same tactics on Wall Street, where the stakes are bigger and you don't get taken to the backroom by a guy named Guido. Poundstone, who brilliantly and fascinatingly explained *The Prisoner's Dilemma*, does it again, with lots of sidelights, featuring Paul Samuelson, L. Ron Hubbard, Benny Siegel, Michael Milken, and more more more.

Jason Shindler (ed.), *The Poem That Changed America*

Howl, on its fiftieth birthday. Among the best essays are the ones by Andrei Codrescu and Billy Collins, who talk about how it influenced them; Frank Bidart, who notes that Allen Ginsberg improved it by editing it, and that his poems got worse the more he obeyed the dogma of "first thought, best thought"; and Luc Sante, who has gotten smarter since he urged us all to share his shocked revulsion that science fiction is not about the Real World.

Charles de Lint, *Widdershins*

Someone described Dorothy Sayers's last two novels as the author's own fanfic, and you could say the same of this one. As the blurb says, it brings together two of the characters we want brought together. Some may find the sheer goodness of the good guys oppressive, but there are also Coyote and other tricksters. I enjoyed it.

Susanne Antonetta, *A Mind Apart*

When I hear *neurodiversity*, I think of me and those like me: the introversion/autism spectrum and those of us with issues about attention. Antonetta, however, is bipolar, to the point where she has to take medicine not to believe that her house is full of Evil Spirits; this book

is about both her kind and mine. She points out that a winning species in the great evolutionary struggle needs to have requisite variety, and neurodiversity fits in with that. She also divides approaches to the world into Mind First and Matter First, and points out that there's no way of being sure which side is right. (She & I are Mind Firsters, by which I mean that, like Immanuel Kant and Robert Anton Wilson [two names not frequently juxtaposed], I recognize that we all perceive from within minds and the "objective" material view is a construct.) I don't like all of this book (one can often be bored by other people's mental deviancies, just like their sexual deviancies), but it gave me much to think about.

Henry Hitchings, *Defining the World*

How Samuel Johnson wrote his dictionary. Well written and informative, and the author gets extra points for having chapter titles in alphabetical order with their Johnsonian definitions.

Michael Barber, *Anthony Powell: A Life*

I love *A Dance to the Music of Time*, and this is a thorough account of its author's life and how he transmuted it into his art.

ICFA

Once again I have attended the International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts, in the company of my spouse, Bernadette Bosky, and my cohusband, Kevin Maroney. Once again I enjoyed it and am trying, two months later, to reconstruct the experience. (Thanks as usual to Bernadette for allowing me to use her notes.)

This year's theme was the visual arts. I am an old-fashioned linear-literate sort who prefers the written word, and as usual I mostly attended sessions in that area, but I did learn a few things about comics, movies, and games. For instance, the first paper I heard, by Robin Woods, dealt with maps and how online games,

such as World of Warcraft, can feed the human desire to understand by mapping.

Thursday, the first full day of the conference, began with a panel entitled "Drawing Down the Word: Prose and Pictures Speaking Together with One Voice." These days, we hear a certain amount of viewing with alarm the possibility that movies, television, and online visuals will return us to an oral culture like the one I am glad humanity has evolved out of, the sort Walter J. Ong described in *Orality and Literacy*. This session made clear, however, that comics and graphic novels are not that sort of thing, but rather a combination of visual and textual communication. Bernadette and the other panelists discussed forerunners, such as emblem books, curiosity books, and illustrated fairy tales.

The next session considered some of the ways graphic fiction is looking at the world. David Higgins talked about how the DC universe mirrored the crisis of 9/11 and its sequelae, while Doug Davis discussed *In the Shadow of No Towers*, Art Spiegelman's rich and moving examination of the same event. Kevin had to follow these two with his very first conference paper, and he gave us a good one. "Capes, Types, and Prototypes" used theories of definition to consider why the Amber books are not considered textual Superhero Comics.

There are many problems with the sort of essentialist approach—"genus and differentia"—that Aristotle suggested. Ludwig Wittgenstein, for instance, claimed that the word *game* cannot be defined in that fashion, instead requiring us to find examples that we agree are "games" and discuss their "family resemblances." I believe that the game problem has been solved by Bernard Suits, in his delightful and undeservedly forgotten book, *The Grasshopper*: Games are

activities in which the participants agree to forgo certain direct approaches to their goals for the purpose of play. But even if that is the case, family resemblance can be a useful approach.

There is another implement as well. George Lakoff believes that human language cannot refer to anything beyond the material world because there is nothing beyond the material world. He supports this denial by adapting Eleanor Rosch's ingenious theory that universals are constructed from *prototypes*, a useful approach to many definitional issues that fortunately does not require acceptance of Lakoff's assumptions. The prototypes for superhero comics include Superman and Batman. Batman is not "super," in the sense of having special powers, but he resembles others of the superhero family in such traits as secret identity and costume. Kevin used the question to open a general discussion of how genres can be defined.

After the Guest of Honor Slide Show, there was a panel on the crisis in comics. Comics seem to be moving through the life cycle of an art form to become a Fabulous Invalid, like the Theatre and the Novel, with continuing predictions of demise and continuing accomplishment. Thence to an enjoyable session on images of teaching in children's literature. Amie Rose Rotruck discussed stories of the doll as teacher, and Zina Peterson compared the schooling of wizards in Earthsea and at Hogwarts.

Usually, the ICFA is adventure two steps removed: discussion of stories of heroic quests. The first paper I saw on Friday, however, was more direct: a first-person account by Neil Easterbrook of his valiant slog through the tangled prose of Frederic Jameson. Like a good first-person narrator, Easterbrook told the tale without expressing awareness of his own heroism,

indicating the difficulties without melodramatizing them and claiming to have brought back a moderate number of gems from his perilous voyage.

Jean Lorrh followed with one of the things I most seek in critical writing: a model that finds a common element in a lot of seemingly different works and makes me wonder why I didn't think of it. She suggests a developing sort of archetypal tale: the *intimate adventure*, in which two protagonists who may not care for each other are forced to struggle together, trust one another, and become intimate, at least psychologically: *Don Quixote*, *Enemy Mine*, any number of "buddy movies." (This is of course one of the dynamics driving slash and the equally lewd but less pleasant imaginings of the Fredric Werthams of this world, but that's only one aspect and rarely the most interesting one.)

Scholar Guest of Honor Thomas Inge, who modestly reported that he became a professor because he lacked the skill to make it as a cartoonist, enlivened lunch with a lecture on one of the great subverting influences of my formative years, Harvey Kurtzmann's original *Mad*. Inge noted that one way *Mad* gained credibility was by openly satirizing Kurtzmann's other publications. The day also featured a panel on defining the fantastic/mimetic boundary in visual arts (Irma Hirsjarvi had particularly interesting things to say and pictures to show), a discussion of photography in Lois Lowry's children's books, and a fanfic panel in which I learned a new term: darkfiction, which is like hurt/comfort, only without the comfort.

Saturday began with a session I think of as distinctively ICFA: scientific and literary looks at the same topic, in this case sleepwalking. Then Bernadette presented her paper: a copiously illustrated look at "Fantastic Fat Bodies in Comic

Strips and Books.” She pointed out that since the 1940s fat bodies have been, for the most part, either stigmatized or ignored, but more recently, with inputs from feminism, postmodernism, and foreign cultures, we are getting more variety. The afternoon featured a panel on Guest Writer Kathleen Ann Goonan, which made me more bitterly regret the reader’s block that keeps me only halfway through her quartet of nanotech novels, and one of Jeri Zulli’s typically thorough and absorbing discussions of the fantastic in respectable lit, in this case *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

As is becoming traditional, we sat at the same table with Peter Straub for the banquet. The awards ceremony was decorous, as they all have been lately, but I had to suppress an inappropriate snicker at one point. I’m a pink-diaper baby who grew up hearing Wobbly songs, and here they were telling me that the Crawford Award went to *Twentieth-Century Ghosts*, by Joe Hill.

Book purchasing is always a major feature of an ICFA for me, and this time I picked up and enjoyed two books directly connected with the conference: *Soundings*, the first collection of Gary Wolfe’s *Locus* reviews (since nominated for a Hugo, which it deserves), and *Polder*, a festschrift for John and Judith Clute, edited by Farah Mendlesohn and Edward James and chock full of highly readable reminiscences, literary discussion, and fiction.

Next year’s conference looks like fun: Representing the Other: Gender and Sexuality in the Fantastic, with GoH Geoff Ryman and Guest Writer Melissa Scott, March 14-18, 2007, same bat-channel.

Materialism is a guard against many kinds of folly and a few kinds of wisdom.

Not forgotten

One of the nicest people I’ve met on livejournal is **Susan Leinbach**, who used the name **scarlatti**. She found love on lj, with a good guy named Doug Spencer, but as they were getting to know each other, she was diagnosed with cancer and had to undergo major surgery. They were able to get together a few times, despite the ocean between them, but then the disease returned and killed her.

I don’t care what anyone says, I liked **Brian Burley**.

Science fiction fandom is a culture with a good collective memory, and long ago Brian did some bad things in pursuit of fannish power. Having gotten a bad reputation, he presented himself as a rogue, perhaps more of one than he actually was. I was always a bit wary in my dealings with him, but he never did me any harm and I grew to enjoy his company. One other thing: I may be wrong about this, but he struck me as a heterosexual man who really liked women. That’s rarer than it should be.

Years ago I met **Leigh Ann Hussey** at a Darkovercon where she delivered a fascinating paper debunking one of Robert Graves’s many debunkable theories. Thereafter, we drifted in and out of each other’s lives. She has died suddenly (traffic accident), and I wish I had gotten to know her better.

Back in the 70s and 80s John Gardner led a jihad against “books about books, instead of books about life.” He and his followers informed us that one **Gilbert Sorrentino**, hitherto unknown to me, had written a book called *Mulligan Stew* that was every bit as bad in that regard as the worst of John Barth and William Gaddis.

Of course I bought and read the book, and I loved it. Like *At Swim-Two-Birds*, *Mulligan Stew* is a novel about the writing

of a novel. The characters, bored and offended by their alleged creator's inept treatment of them, began interacting on their own, and there are digressions, subdigressions, irrelevant inclusions, copious lists of imagined entities, prurient poems, and assorted unclassifiable.

It was not perfect. I had the feeling that the author, like the fanatic defined by George Santayana, had lost sight of his goals in redoubling his efforts, had forgotten how the book began by the time it ended and hoped the reader would do likewise, but I can get along with that if the trip is worth it. (I have since enjoyed Neal Stephenson novels and *Simpsons* shows.)

He wrote many more books, but I never found one I enjoyed as much as *Mulligan Stew*. I'm willing to assume that a lot of that was me; he was never an easy writer.

(Oh, and Gardner ran into the occupational disease of narcs, red squadders, and men's room entrappers: He went native, his own novels growing more and more recursive and metafictional.)

Stanislaw Lem wrote some fascinating speculative fiction, particularly at the shorter lengths. He also wrote sf criticism, but *de mortuis nil nisi bonum*.

Sixties singer/songwriter **Gene Pitney** has dropped dead while touring the UK. He sang a lot of songs I liked, such as "Mecca," "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance," and especially "Every Breath I Take."

William Sloane Coffin said, "War is a coward's escape from the problems of peace." He resisted the folly in Vietnam and the one in Iraq.

Muriel Spark wrote many novels, usually short and not quite explicable. The one everyone knows is *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, a masterpiece of construction. My favorite is the metafictional *Loitering with*

Intent. Memento Mori is about old people getting phone calls telling them they are about to die. The source of these calls is not revealed; I like the theory that the author done it. *The Comforters*, *The Bachelors*, and *The Girls of Slender Means* are fascinating; *The Driver's Seat* downright creepy. *The Abbess of Crewe* (which sounds like something from a limerick) is Watergate in a convent. It works.

I knew **Torkel Franzén** as an intelligent and interesting member of the trufen mailing list, and I was vaguely aware that he had translated Jack Vance, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Brian Aldiss into Swedish. After he died, his friend John-Henri Holmberg informed us that he was also (or I should say, primarily) a mathematical philosopher of some repute.

Floyd Patterson was a likable heavy-weight champ. As with most boxers who don't die young, his mind was gone by the time he died.

Also, **John Kenneth Galbraith**, **Shelley Winters**, **James "Semaj the Elder" Middleton**, **Desmond Dekker**, **Buck Owens**, **Craig "Ironhead" Heyward**, **Billy Preston**, **Raoul Bott**, **Alex Toth**.

Nasty, Brutish, & Short

John McCain hung tough when the Vietnamese had him, but he's got a nasty case of Stockholm syndrome with Bush.

A Homeland Security officer has been entrapped by a fake teenager to whom he talked dirty on the net. I haven't seen a better result of corrupt policing practices since the bitch set Mayor Barry up.

Excelsior,

Arthur