

Nice Distinctions 15

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Another three months, another issue, another failure to come up with a grabber of an opening sentence.

I continue to enjoy participating in livejournal (as **supergee**). One opportunity that provides is to create opinion polls. When the media reported the demise of Enron *capo di tutti capi* Kenneth Lay, I asked if people thought it was

- o fake death
- o suicide
- o Knew Too Much
- o as reported

The latter two were the big faves. I voted for the last, but am open to new information.

I'M WALKIN'

Almost every day since last July, I have walked at least 20 minutes and up to an hour. I think it's been good for me. Combined with the severe reduction in sugar intake required by the diabetes, it has lowered my blood sugar and weight.

Contrary to what some suggested, I have not succeeded in snaring the wily endorphin. I didn't really expect to. To do so would require more time and more speed than I am now doing. I fear that it will be like Jam Tomorrow and the number of missions Yossarian had to fly in *Catch-22*.

NOVEMBER

I am going to vote, and I encourage you to do likewise. I'm hoping this election will be like 1998, when the Republican Party learned that it was even stupider than the American

people. Then, as you recall, the people were supposed to turn on a competent president because his sex life was too interesting, and they didn't; the Democrats kicked ass.

I have to admit I'm not terribly enthusiastic. A few years ago, there was an election in Louisiana and the good guys were saying, "Vote for the crook. It's important." When I encourage people to vote Democratic, I feel like I'm saying, "Vote for the political hacks who aren't complete assholes. It's important."

I seem to have become a radical without doing anything, and I don't like it at all. I always was a sexndope radical, but I used to be sneered at by real economic radicals for being a welfare-state liberal. Now the Republicans pride themselves on having done nothing for the poor who lost everything to Katrina, and most Democrats don't seem to mind. The Democrats are unenthusiastic about torture, but many of them still accept technothriller scenarios where torture might work. The Connecticut primary was seen as a victory for the radicals, which in that case appears to mean those who have noticed that our Iraq adventure is a disaster based on a lie. This time it may turn out that both parties are stupider than the people.

Texts

Live in the future long enough, as we timebinding sf-reading slans do, and you not only face disillusionment, you come to expect it, from the real world and eventually even from sf itself. In the time it took *Star Trek* to move from the small screen to the big one, its devotees had accumulated such hopes that some had moved on to expect disappointment, which turned out to be a good strategy. The news of *Variable Star*, written by Spider Robinson from an outline by Robert A. Heinlein, offered similar trepidation, except among the substantial minority of sf readers who dislike one or both. ("I hope the hippie messed up the fascist's book.") Having enjoyed sumbnall of the work of both, I expected moderate pleasure, and got it.

It's Classic Heinlein, like the Future History (which it is set in) and the better juveniles. There are enough sociobiology and emetic endearments to mark it with the Master's touch (as a dog marks a tree), but not too much. There are conspiratorial

machinations and a quintessentially Heinleinian love story. Heinlein wit mixes with Robinson punning. Robinson also contributes a bit more Zen than the original and some post-RAH references (Smithers, from *The Simpsons*). Those who want more of the same (but different enough not to be boring) from either or both should not be disappointed.

Timothy Leary managed to annoy everyone at one time or another. My greatest complaint is that he made it impossible for trained professionals to develop a program for therapeutic use of psychedelics by peddling them to one and all as a simultaneous source of enlightenment, orgasms, and pissing off your parents, and the only defense I can come up with is that if he hadn't someone else would have.

Nevertheless. Tim Leary was a bullshit artist, but one should emphasize both of those words. You get the Tim Leary you deserve, as he himself once said, and I mostly like the one I got. He turned his promotional skills from acid to the program of space migration, intelligence increase, and life extension, which characterizes the sort of science fiction I want to live in. His eight-circuit view of the mind may be no more than a good source of metaphor, but I am not at all sure that any psychology, including the evolutionary sort, does more than that.

Timothy Leary: A Biography, by Robert Greenfield, is not a full-fledged attack bio, but it is somewhat hostile. Leary's autobiographical revisionism is highlighted, and his theories are treated as writing behavior, rather than subjects for discussion. Still, Leary's good points show, and we can see that he was done by a lot worse than he did.

It would have taken more prophetic skill than I have to guess that Leary and Dick Alpert/Ram Dass would turn out to be two of the sanest and happiest of the 60s culture heroes, but that's the Demiurge's sense of humor for you. Look at *Serious Lit*, where Saul Bellow and John Updike turned to cruel self-parody while Filthy Philip Roth has become a good choice for the Nobel. And then there's the Beach Boys: Brian Wilson being the longest-lived of the brothers was not the way to bet, let alone his returning to sanity and completing a nonludicrous version of

Smile. Catch a Wave, by Peter Ames Carlin, tells the story.

When I was just getting into fanzine fandom in the early Seventies, one of the most interesting people in it was Tip, an old guy named James Tiptree jr. Well, actually he was younger than I am now (though he described himself as old), and we now know he was really a woman, named Alice Sheldon. I had been even more fascinated by the fiction than by the fan writing—powerful stories such as “The Girl Who Was Plugged In,” “All the Kinds of Yes,” “The Milk of Paradise,” and that tale of humanity's ultimate apotheosis, “A Momentary Taste of Being”—but in retrospect, the Tiptree persona may have been an even greater creation than any of those.

(I wasn't bothered by the revelation; I've never prided myself on my male-dar. I'm somewhat annoyed that one of my favorite writers, Robert Silverberg, is taken as the Horrible Example, having spoken of her “ineluctable masculinity.” As he later explained, he himself was never much at hunting and fighting and other such ~~butch~~ masculine activities and was thus easily impressed. Most if not all others, both male and female, were fooled, but didn't express the mistake as memorably.)

I don't know if it's meaningful to say that Alice Sheldon was “a man in a woman's body”; she had overwhelming desires to be a strong independent person and to make love to women, but the culture told her she had the wrong kind of body for both of those. Combined with a nasty tendency towards depression and a taste for stimulants and analgesics, this frustration produced a brilliant but self-destructive writer.

We now have an excellent bio, *James Tiptree, Jr.: The Double Life of Alice B. Sheldon*, by Julie Phillips. It's probably worth reading even if one does not love Tiptree's writing, but for me it was downright fascinating.

Where Three Roads Meet, by John Barth, is the Barth mixture as usual, playing with storytelling, playing with sex, playing with playing, here in three self-referring and cross-referring novellas. Lacks Story Values, Relevance to Life, and other supposed essentials. I like it, but I know it's not everyone's stick of tea.

Maimonedes, by Sherwin B. Nuland, is a thoughtful study of the great medieval Jewish philosopher and his efforts to codify Judaism. The author, a Jewish doctor writing about a Jewish doctor, begins with a discussion of why so many Jews become doctors (the Jewish tradition that intellectuals should also work in the physical world, which may be one sign that I have a *goyische kopf*). I also learned that Maimonedes' nickname, the Rambam, which sounds like something from a 50s vocal group record, is an acronym (Rabbi Moses Ben Maimon). There were many in power who wanted to wipe out the Jews, or at least convert them by the sword, and it is inspiring to see how well Maimonedes managed to live, think, and write in the face of that.

Chess Bitch, by Jennifer Shahade, tells us that there really are female chess champs, including the author herself and the remarkable Polgar sisters from Hungary. Good for them.

I love to read writers writing about writing, and the only problem connected with doing so is that it makes me wish I were more of one. Playwright Alan Bennett, who published a miscellany called *Writing Home* a few years ago, has a new one called *Untold Stories*. Both are charming.

Opus Dei, by John L. Allen jr., is a sympathetic look at the bad guys from *The Da Vinci Code*. They're not all that powerful; they're not all the secretive; and only the celibate ones mortify themselves with whips and nails, and even they don't do it that much. I'm convinced. But they are conservative Roman Catholics, so they want people in general and women in particular to be enslaved by their reproductive nature.

A SUMMARY OF MY FANNISH NATURE

I read the stuff.

My father, who was born in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, grew up reading Karel Čapek and Jules Verne. I once heard Lois McMaster Bujold say, "I never could believe that sf was crap because the smartest man in the world, my father, read it." I had a similar experience: I also learned from my father that it's possible to enjoy sf and James Joyce.

I grew up in the 50s, when science fiction was telling us that by the third millennium we'd have robot maids and robot cars (liar, liar, pants on fire, science fiction). The kind I particularly liked was the satirical stuff *Galaxy* was known for: Pohl & Kornbluth, Robert Sheckley, Philip K. Dick, and particularly Fredric Brown, who wrote the greatest short shorts ever. (Who reads short shorts? We read short shorts.)

In the 60s, sf was one of the ways I expanded my mind. As I've said of other influences, I experimented and I didn't exhale. *Stranger in a Strange Land*—yeah, sure, a lot of it looks sexist now, but it wasn't all about sex. There was "Man, as a social animal, can no more escape government than the individual can escape bondage to his bowels" and the bizarre sf idea that the best way to get through to the "amiable nullity" who leads the free world is through his wife's astrologer. And more Phil Dick and the idea (*Time out of Joint*) that we never know all that's going on around us, and *Dangerous Visions* leading me to the likes of John Sladek, who may have been even funnier than Sheckley.

In the 70s I discovered sf fandom. I finally got up the nerve to do my own zine (*The Diagonal Relationship*, title from a Kornbluth story) on 5/5/77. The idea was to lay words (which I was good at) in front of people from all over the country instead of trying to use social skills (which I was lousy at) to meet people, make friends, get laid, maybe even find true love. In other words, I was trying to do a blog, somewhat hindered by the lack of an Internet. Nevertheless, it worked completely. Some people weren't really sure if what I was doing was an actual fanzine, but some thought I was doing a good one and others considered it a good whatever-it-was. By now I've been doing what I do for so long that I'm part of the paradigm.

I joined a lot of amateur press associations, which were kinda like newsgroups or mailing lists, except on paper and much slower. In the most venerable one, the Fantasy Amateur Press Association, I met Bernadette. That's the true love part of the story.

I got online in the mid-90s, hanging out in rec.arts.sf.fandom and alt.poly and trufen, a mailing list for fanzine fans, including many who started doing zines 20-30 years before I did.

I read the stuff, and think about it. I go to sf movies, but they don't have much of what I read sf for. I am in favor of the idea of writing stories about media characters doing you-know with one another, but I do not read or write such things myself. I recognize that game playing genuinely represents a form of intelligence as good as the linear-literate kind, but the latter is my kind.

I am the founder of a notional organization called United Perverts, based on the idea that gay, bi, trans, poly, swingers, etc. have more in common with each other than with the straights who want all of us limited to the Procrustean Double Bed of One Right Way. I feel pretty much the same about fandom.

BRINGING SOCIAL INCOMPETENCE INTO DISREPUTE

"He loves to cuss, gets a jolly when a mountain biker wipes out trying to keep up with him, and now we're learning that [he] loves flatulence jokes. A top insider let that slip when explaining why [he] is paranoid around women, always worried about his behavior." SF fan? Computer geek?

Nah, President.

Nasty, Brutish, & Short

On 06/06/06 the mortgage interest rate was 6.66%. I think that makes it fairly clear who runs the banks. I can't say I'm particularly surprised.

A book of sex tips from *Cosmopolitan* is called *How to Set His Thighs on Fire*. That's supposed to be good? It sounds like a rash.

Fruit & Nut Smut

He felt his cashew become a banana, and then a rippled yam, bursting with weight—John Updike, *Brazil*

Annals of approximate food

Yogies are described on the package as "yogurty-covered fruity dots."

Not forgotten

Lyle Stuart encouraged three of my favorite corrupting influences: *Mad Magazine*, Paul Krassner, and Albert Ellis. He made a lot of

money publishing best-selling crap and plowed much of it back into thought-provoking books. Like a lawyer who supports the right to counsel by representing clients he despises, Stuart was the only one who would publish controversial books like *The Anarchist Cookbook* and the racist *Turner Diaries*.

Jim Baen did at least two major things right. He has been widely praised for his approach to the Internet. Unlike the megacorps that have been putting heroic (and, one hopes, shortsighted) efforts into making sure that no one looks at or listens to anything without paying them, Jim Baen has made his books available online, and he seems to be profiting therefrom. He has also set up a system of writing apprenticeships, like those in visual art in the Renaissance, in which generations of writers learn from collaborating with their elders. That too seems to be working.

The publishing world is poorer without these two individualists.

rich brown (he preferred to write his name without caps) was a bridge from the old fandom to the new, keeping the old days of Seventh Fandom alive while concluding every post to trufen and other fannish mailing lists with a screenful of words from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. He got into arguments, but usually wasn't nasty about them. He will be missed.

Ralph Ginzburg first reached my attention in the 50s, with a book he called *An Unhurried View of Erotica* and a friend of mine more accurately described as "a mad dash." Having found a market, he published four issues of *Eros*, an elegant expensive magazine of what is now considered soft-core erotica. There was some moderately explicit writing, some classical art, and, most horrifying, waist-up pictures of a naked interracial couple. Ginzburg was charged with "pandering obscenity." An ambition-crazed young prosecutor named Arlen Specter won a conviction.

Ginzburg then published *Fact*, which became most notorious for an article in which many psychiatrists opined that Barry Goldwater was too mentally ill to be a good president and Lyndon Johnson was not. I am grateful to Ginzburg for his major role, however inadvertent, in curing me of excessive faith in Freudianism.

After years of court battles (Paul Krassner called it "a travesty of injustice"), Ginzburg served a few months in jail. He was, as usual then, not allowed conjugal visits, and when he got out he described that situation with typical calm understatement in a book entitled *Castrated*.

His last publication dealt with what he may have found even more interesting than sex: *Moneysworth*. He eventually tired of publishing and spent his last days as a photographer.

He was a money grubber, but no more dishonest about it than the unerotic panders of Mad Ave., and he gave us some amusement along the way. The recent demise of Kenneth Lay reminds me that there were many worse.

Something many of you may not have seen; I originally wrote it in 1977, when I was just starting to do a zine.

SARGENT SHRIVER'S BLEEDING HEARTS CLUB BAND

In vain you would insist that *vista* was a respectable word meaning "a scenic view," did not have "dirty connotations," and had nothing to do with the female reproductive system—Ray Russell, *The Colony*

In 1962 I read *Catch-22*. As many of you know, it is a book of fantastic, surrealistic black humor. Its hero is paranoid enough to believe that his government is trying to kill him.

Four years later, my government was trying to kill me. They were defending freedom in Southeast Asia the way freedom is usually defended—by conscripting slaves to risk their lives. Worse yet, they had examined me and decided that I was physically, mentally, and morally fit to serve in the armed forces. (This may have been my first clue that my government did not know what it was doing.) I was not succeeding as a graduate student in Mathematics, so I had to figure out another way to continue my eight-year draft-evasion sentence. In a sordid hotel, a woman recommended that I join VISTA. (I believe that's what they call *foreshadowing*.)

VISTA was part of the War on Poverty. (You remember the War on Poverty. Poverty won.) I wrote for an application, and after a mere four months they sent me one. They

decided that I was physically, mentally, and morally fit to serve in the War on Poverty (which may have been another mistake), and in June, 1966, I went off to Chicago to be trained as a Warrior.

And I learned a few things. I learned about Social Scientists. We were lectured by many of these, ranging from competent to moronic.

Many of the Social Scientists displayed an attitude I have since come to associate with all types of religious fanatic: utter credulity to the Revealed Truths of their own faith, combined with utter contempt for any other. One Social Scientist asked what our motivation for helping people should be. A devoutly religious friend of mine raised his hand and said, "love."

"Aha!" said the SS, in a tone of elephantine sarcasm, "You mean you wish to have sexual intercourse with the poor'?" To this day, I regret that I lacked the courage to ask him to expand upon his most interesting definition of love by telling us how he felt about his mother. (I forget what the right answer to the SS's question was, but it was a sociological phrase that might be summarized as a euphemism for "love.")

We also were assigned to work with various social agencies. I had the good fortune to draw the Welfare Department. I found it highly instructive to see what happens when human benevolence becomes institutionalized as a civil service job. The recipients became, in the eyes of the caseworkers, units to be serviced. One example of this was the Paternity Form.

The Paternity Form is the lowest type of pornography known to the mind of man. When a welfare recipient becomes pregnant, she must fill out one of these reports, so that the Welfare Department can track down the "putative father" and make him help support the child. (Often these investigations cost more than the child-support payments.) The recipient will of course have her payments cut off if she does not answer questions such as: "Name of putative father," "When did intercourse first take place?" "How often did intercourse take place?" (Somehow they neglected to ask; "In what position did intercourse take place'?" Perhaps the questionnaire was made up by a Government Social Scientist who is unaware that intercourse can take place in more than one position.)

If the caseworkers did treat the recipients as impersonal units, perhaps procedures like this were part of the reason. It must be painful to force someone whom you think of as human to answer questions like that. (I should say, of course, that some of the caseworkers I met were not dehumanized. Yet. But from the comments of others about their clients, I was led to the conclusion that they would enjoy asking questions like that, which to me is like a policeman who enjoys entrapping gays in men's rooms or a concentration-camp guard who enjoys his work.)

I also learned about myself. Like the woman with the louse in her hair, I lack the power to see myself as others see me. (I wonder how many people who quote that line know where it comes from.) Had the gift given me that power, I would have seen that I lacked such desirable VISTA traits as:

(1) Being "self-starting";

(2) "The ability to move into new situations and take over quickly;

(3) The moral arrogance to believe that I knew what was right for everyone else.

Fortunately, I also lacked self-knowledge.

The VISTA hierarchy did notice that there was something wrong with me, which was surprising, as they didn't notice much else. I have since read (A.A. Rogow, *The Psychiatrists*) that a study of the psychological evaluations that the Peace Corps uses on its trainees indicated that, as a predictor, they are almost—but not quite—as effective as drawing names out of a hat. I believe it. The Government Social Scientists who evaluated us failed to notice that two of our number had undergone near-total personality collapse during the training period, though their condition was obvious to the rest of us. (There may be a parallel here to the well-known Rosenhan experiment, in which "normal" people had themselves committed to mental institutions and then made no effort to "act crazy." Fellow patients frequently guessed that they were doing an experiment, but the staffs never suspected a thing.)

The Government Social Scientists had some dim awareness of the shortcomings I have mentioned, but they were much more concerned with the fact that I had been involved in a Sex Scandal.

Every VISTA and Peace Corps training group has a Sex Scandal. It's traditional. One like mine—involving two people (both

trainees), two sexes, one race, and no pregnancies—was a pretty poor one by VISTA standards, but it was the best my group could come up with, so the authorities did what they could with it.

What had happened was that an envious roommate of my friend's had reported us. (Lest I be accused of boasting, let me hasten to point out that I didn't say which of us she envied.) By now, I was somewhat familiar with the alleged thought processes of Government Social Scientists. I was not surprised that they were morally outraged at our behavior. I was not overly surprised that they were too hypocritical to admit to their moral outrage, and so discussed the whole thing in terms of "interpersonal intragroup relations" and the like. I was a bit surprised, though, when they sent me to a shrink to find out what my motivation was. (He, being a Government Social Scientist, couldn't figure it out either.)

After the shrink gave up, I was sent to the Expert in Charge of Difficult Cases. I gave an impassioned explanation of my commitment to social change without once mentioning the term "Selective Service." The expert decided that I was salvageable, but that I should be given a mediocre and somewhat punitive assignment.

And here is the message of hope in all this. To be sure, the Government is out to get us. To be sure, it has great and powerful resources. But be of good cheer, for the Government is every bit as inept in doing evil as when it tries to do good. What they did was, they threw me in the briar patch.

They assigned me to what they considered a dull office job with a Bail Project, interviewing prisoners and determining if they were eligible for pretrial release without bail. It was, incidentally, one of the few VISTA projects that did tangible good. I was good enough at it that the project director invited me back for a second year. I enjoyed it so much that I eagerly accepted. But I haven't told you the best part. In 1966 the United States Government punished me by sentencing me to live in San Francisco.

Excelsior,

Arthur