

## Nice Distinctions 16

Arthur D. Hlavaty, 206 Valentine Street, Yonkers, NY  
10704-1814. 914-965-4861. [hlavaty@panix.com](mailto:hlavaty@panix.com)  
<<http://www.livejournal.com/users/supergee/>>  
<<http://www.maroney.org/hlavaty/>>

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Robert Anton Wilson has died. He and Robert A. Heinlein had more influence on me than anyone else who didn't have me before the age of seven, because they thought like me (strike that, reverse it) and explained their approach both clearly and wittily. There are those who live in the world and use their minds, and those who live in their minds and deal with the world. (A Wilson character put it more strongly: "We live in our fantasies and endure our realities.") I am one of the latter, and Heinlein and Wilson did the most to help me survive as one. I was going to write a summary of the ways Wilson has influenced me, but there are too many.

Other than that, we are thriving. Bernadette and I are getting lots of well-paying work, and Kevin continues to have a good job. We are healthy, as are our pet rats, and all would be well if we weren't living in the best-armed Third World country ever, run by an idiot. ITMFA (Impeach the Misogynistic Fascist Already, he explained euphemistically.)

On a cheerier note, I continue to revel in livejournal and the company of delightful people I have not yet met, such as the woman who reported, "My spam says my girlfriend is angry that I don't have a large penis," and the one who replied, "Am not!"

### PLANNED OBSOLESCENCE

Perhaps computers are going from "Oh boy! I'm going to get a new one." to "Oh drat! I have to get a new one."

### TRIP REPORT

The three of us spent a week at the Double JJ Ranch in Michigan. We had a nice log cabin with lots of sleeping room. We got there on Wednesday, and Bernadette's sisters joined us for the weekend, taking the cabin next to ours. Her teenaged nephew came along, which meant we had to change eating places.

Alcohol is no longer one of the Some Drugs there's a War against, but the same high level of thinking tends to be applied to it. For instance, years ago in Illinois, the late Bob Shea and I were buying groceries, and he purchased a bottle of wine. The checkout clerk, being under 21, asked Bob to press the button on the cash register himself because minors were not allowed to sell alcohol. (Bob had been living there so long it didn't seem strange to him.) So I wasn't surprised that the first thing I saw in a drugstore (unlike NY) was wine. But Michigan also has a law that minors are not allowed to enter places where alcohol is served, even when there's none in the room. Fortunately, they had another eating room untainted by Demon Rum, and the food was the same.

We went because Bernadette has long been interested in horses, but had never ridden one. It went extremely well. I'd been to a dude ranch fifty years ago and rode then, but remembered little or nothing about it. Still, I passed Blackadder's test: I rode a horse better than another horse would. I decided once was enough; Kevin did two rides; Bernadette loved it and rode twice a day.

The impulse to change sex is called *gender dysphoria*. Furrries have species dysphoria. In extreme moments, I get kingdom dysphoria and would rather be mineral than animal. The other day (again) I lost my cell phone and realized that if I'd evolved past human to machine, not only would I not have these feelings of fear and rage, but I could have my phone built in. Someone found it, and I returned to acceptance of my condition.

Recently, conservative Dennis Prager publicly wallowed in a fantasy of forcing Keith Ellison, a Muslim, to swear an oath on a Bible. I can imagine all sorts of nasty stuff going through Prager's alleged mind, but I find it unlikely that he is desperately repressing a desire to

proclaim that there is one God and Muhammad is His prophet.

We frequently hear that opponents of same-sex marriage are projecting their own longings, and certainly some of them sound like that, particularly when they go on about how the irresistibility of such desires forces us to write prohibitions into the laws, but we should not underestimate plain old authoritarianism. As Robert Anton Wilson said, there is only universal rule about sex: Sex shall not be unregulated.

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### **IF WE REALLY HAD A LIBERAL MEDIA ESTABLISHMENT**

No politician would dare to hire George Will, because he once disagreed with Al Sharpton and thus would be called a racist.

When the Rude Pundit's newspaper columns accused Dick Cheney of forcibly sodomizing his opponents, more responsible commentators would be politely asked to dissociate themselves from him. Most wouldn't.

Noam Chomsky's fans would complain that he was being censored because another show in the same time slot had higher ratings.

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### **DOWN IN THE FLOOD**

[Diary entry] Yesterday I went down to the basement to read a gritty novel about a man heroically surviving in a pretechnological society. (It's the sort of book I read if and only if I am being paid to do so, but this case I am, and the basement is where I read books that I'm taking notes on, because I have a table set up for such work.) There was a nasty rainstorm outside, and by the time I'd gotten to page 3, it was inside too. We were flooded.

This is the third flood we've had, and we were somewhat prepared; relatively little valuable stuff was damaged, and with heroic efforts by K (B was at work) we got the water out. As with the earlier floods I was reminded of Jesus' words about the prevalence of moth and rust and the importance thereof in treasure assignment.

Yesterday, too, Mark Morford did a column feeling sorry for those who don't believe that material things are wonderful, magickal, and ensouled. Usually I am proud

to be a Morfordite, but I part company on this one.

As I've mentioned above, I am an introvert. One definition of that is that I feel that paying attention takes energy from me, rather than giving it to me. I resist the AUTISM and ASPERGER labels, but I am extremely introverted and so I feel that attention sucks *lots of* energy from me. If the world were the magickal place Morford says it is, it would be an even bigger pain in the ass. I love science because it is an effective, impersonal way of dealing with all that mere stuff, far preferable to having to submit to capricious entities that want us to sacrifice to them and/or utter proper prayers and/or refrain from buttsex, and do not give us clear feedback on which rules are enforced.

What I like is people, which I believe do have souls. I cannot prove this, and recognize that I could be mistaken, but I believe that, as well as being fastened to physical bodies subject to the same rules as other objects, each and every one of us contains something immaterial and immortal. The verb that even normal people use with *attention* is *pay*, and I'm far more willing to pay that price with people than with things.

## **Texts**

One underappreciated role in the arts is the Wife, offering the Genius tolerance of bad behavior and protection from the rigors of Real Life. In a worst-case scenario, the genius has phases of violent madness, and the Wife doesn't even get sex out of the deal, settling for the company of Genius and the disinterested reward of having kept the Genius going long enough to enrich the world with great works. Victoria Glendinning has written an excellent bio of such a Wife: *Leonard Woolf*.

Perhaps no sf writer since William Gibson has made a bigger splash with his first novel than John Scalzi did with *Old Man's War*. Now, boldly going where Gibson didn't, Scalzi has published something different from what he became famous for. *The Android's Dream* is a comedy set in a galaxy where humans aspire to rise to second-class status, and I enjoyed it a whole bunch. The first chapter is an extended fart joke, but it's a good one and, hey,

good enough for Chaucer... This one is highly recommended.

One reason I used to think I was a libertarian was the image of the Market, where everybody gets what they want, versus the State, where everyone gets what the majority wants. In practice that has never worked as well as it's supposed to, for one reason because economies of scale tend to keep making the market more majoritarian. For instance, there used to be a vast range of fiction and nonfiction in that nice small cheap mass-market paperback format. Now everything but bestsellers and niche books is available at best in trade paperback. *The Long Tail*, by Christopher Anderson, says that help is on the way, that the Web overrides the economies of scale and makes it possible to make money servicing the outriders. I hope so. Like everyone else, however, Anderson has not found a good way to make the provision of information remunerative when, as a character in Charles Stross's *Accelerando* notes, "[C]lassical economics [is] the allocation of resources under scarcity. Information doesn't work that way."

*Always Magic in the Air*, by Ken Emerson, tells of the rock & roll songwriters of the early 60s. There are two theories about those days: that they were a time when the music stagnated until the British Invasion saved the music, and that there was some interesting stuff going on that was then buried under a wave of white boys trying to sound black. They're both right, and Sturgeon's Approximation applied as usual. This book covers some of the good parts, such as Doc Pomus (the brother of famous lawyer Raoul Felder), who wrote almost every 60s Elvis song that didn't stink ("Little Sister," "His Latest Flame").

Michael Bérubé is one of David Horowitz's Most Dangerous Professors in America, which doesn't guarantee that he's worth reading, but that's the way to bet (many good ones for each Ward Churchill), and he's done two very good books recently. *Rhetorical Occasions*, as one might guess, is a collection of essays, on such subjects as Martha Nussbaum's *Cultivating Humanity*, the limits to Alan Sokal's critique of postmodernism, and the problems of college teaching as a career. *What's Liberal about the Liberal Arts?* reflects his approach

to teaching literature, in which post-modernism informs the study of books without overwhelming it, as in a particularly thoughtful discussion of the dead white male William Dean Howells. His blog was usually delightful, but occasionally got too ironic, self-referential, and meta, to the extent that when he announced that he was closing it, I wondered what he really meant by that. Alas, he really meant that he was closing it, though he is apparently going to appear regularly on *Crooked Timber*.

Gore Vidal's *Palimpsest*, the first volume of his autobiography, was a tough act to follow, and the sequel, *Point to Point Navigation*, sometimes seems like a pile of leftovers, though very good leftovers. A high point is the touching description of the death of his longtime companion, Howard Auster. Vidal has always insisted that one secret of their fifty happy years together was that they didn't have sex with each other, a statement that inspires disbelief in many, particularly those who are sure that gays are ALL ABOUT TEH SEXXX. I believe him.

I.F. Stone said that *All Governments Lie*. Myra MacPherson uses that line as the title of an excellent bio of Stone. There has been a certain amount of hostility to the book because she doesn't say that Stone spied for Russia (he didn't of course, but he gave Russian spies some of the same information he gave his readers) or else because she approved of his distrust of Stalin.

#### **CORRECTION**

I wish to apologize for implying in an earlier issue that the Bush Administration treacherously revealed the identity of an agent protecting our national security to punish her because her husband was doing his job.

The Bush Administration treacherously revealed the identity of an agent protecting our national security to punish her because she was doing her job.

#### **Not forgotten**

**John M. Ford** was a truly remarkable fiction writer. He is best known for *The Dragon Waiting*, an alternate history of the times written about in Shakespeare's chronicle plays. I respect that, but I love *The Scholars of*

*Night*, a spy/technothriller that echoes Christopher Marlowe. I also got a great deal of pleasure from his contributions to *Making Light*, Patrick and Teresa Nielsen Hayden's blog, which have now been collected there. He had an alarmingly flawed body; a transplanted kidney gave us a few more years of him, for which I for one am extremely grateful.

Like Ford, **Wilson Tucker** excelled at both sf and fan writing. I got to know him at a con where he was GoH and I was Fan GoH, and he was very helpful in explaining the whole GoH business to me. He lived a long time and seems to have enjoyed it, and a lot of us enjoyed him.

**Richard Moorman** [armoire-man], made live-journal a significantly more pleasant and interesting place until cellular life on its own terms, freely reproducing, took root in his head and ate his brain. It has now killed him.

Back in the 70s **Baldemar Huerta** (better known as **Freddy Fender**) sang as if it were still the 50s and the music hadn't died: "Before the Next Teardrop Falls," "Wasted Days and Wasted Nights," and "[She's Living It Up] I'm Living It Down."

**Jack Williamson** was actually older than science fiction, and he wrote it well for a long, long time.

**Clifford Geertz** was a great anthropologist. For instance, in his essay "Common Sense as a Cultural System" (even its title says things that more people should know), he noted that in any human population a few infants will be born with genital conformations not immediately identifiable as male or female. There are, he reports, three ways cultures deal with this: Some treat the people born that way as holy and give them positions of importance; some treat such people as the Creator's mistakes and condescend to them; and some find the concept so horrifying that they try to pretend it never happens. Geertz is so offended by the third group that he breaks one of the most powerful tabus of the Anthropologist tribe: He calls them "savages." That's us, of course.

**Ahmet Ertegun** started Atlantic Records, the great r & b label.

**Ellen Willis** was a sharp, perceptive feminist of the sort who had no trouble distinguishing between feminism and smut stomping.

**Sondra Swift** presented fascinating and knowledgeable papers every year at the International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts and became a good friend of ours. The ICFA won't be the same without her.

**Gerald R. Ford** was the last Republican president to give a shit about poor people. George W. Bush has inspired a certain amount of nostalgia for him, as Ford inspired nostalgia for the previously unappreciated Harry Truman. As Clarence Darrow once remarked, the progress of presidents makes you wonder which way evolution is going.

**Charles L. Grant** was a nice guy who wrote good horror fiction. Nonfictionally horrible things happened to his lungs a few years ago and now have killed him.

**Andre Waters** played professional football and suffered many concussions. At the age of 44, he had the brain of an 80-year-old with incipient Alzheimer's. He had enough brain left to know he wouldn't have enough brain left for long, so he put a bullet in it.

**Robert Altman** directed a lot of good movies, of which my favorite was *OC & Stiggs*. Did I say I was a normal person?

**Molly Ivins** said, "There are two kinds of humor. One kind that makes us chuckle about our foibles and our shared humanity—like what Garrison Keillor does. The other kind holds people up to public contempt and ridicule—that's what I do." And she was wonderful at it.

**Anatol Rapoport** thought intelligently and wrote well about conflict.

**Andrew Anthos** did what used to be called "supporting the troops" back before that meant lying them into a disastrous war and then giving them lousy care when they got hurt. He was beaten to death because someone thought he was gay.

**Thomas Eagleton** was going to run for vice president until it was learned that he'd had his depression treated with electroshock, which stigmatized him. Better he should have gobbled pills till he was incoherent, like Chief Justice Rehnquist.

Also, **William Styron, Jack Palance, Jayge Carr, and Dick Eney.**

### Nasty, Brutish, and Short

Dennis Hastert did such a good job of covering up for Mark Foley it's a shame the Republicans can't make him a cardinal.

Would you call an intellectually challenged lion a leotard?

Contemporary paradigms mandate high-fiber food and low-flow toilets. Is it any wonder our lives are full of crap?

"In our civilization, and under our republican form of government, intelligence is so highly honored that it is rewarded by exemption from the cares of office"—Ambrose Bierce

Drove over two bridges today and forgot to engage in phobic panic. Ravages of age, I suppose.

Michel Foucault, like John Norman, believed that the BDSM scenarios that excited him were The Way The World Is.

Irony is perhaps second only to torture as a device that can be successfully wielded without skill.

Formerly sentient senator Jim Bunning was one of only two senators to vote against confirmation of Defense Secretary Robert Gates, perhaps because he couldn't get his computer to work.

One of the few things Karl Marx said that I like is that history repeats itself, first as tragedy, then as farce. But it doesn't always work that way: Dan Quayle, *then* George W. Bush.

I am old enough to remember when the New Criticism was the new criticism.

The new McDonald's ad campaign asks, "Are you Mac enough?" The reply that comes to mind is, "Nah, I'm too Windows." (Deep down inside, I'm still CP/M.)

Daniel Boorstin defined *celebrity* as someone who is famous for being famous. Paris Hilton has taken it one step further: She is famous for being *undeservedly* famous.

**Dungeons and Deconstruction.** The never-ending quest for the Transcendental Signified! Aporias that can take away your phallogocentric weaponry! The danger of falling into a swamp of Judith Butler's prose!

Daniel Ortega was reelected. This could mean that Bush is bad enough to bring back Communism.

"You can't throw anything away because there is no away": The environmentalist *Huis-Clos* (Hell is six billion other people).

"We had a lot in common. It was a new experience for me to be dependent on a strong, variable, sexually restless, charismatic leader who was insanely erratic. I usually played that role myself"—Tim Leary, on Eldridge Cleaver

I want to be a corporation because a corporation has the rights of a person, but not the responsibilities.

Chocolate, like sexual intercourse, is both excellent and overrated.

It took the Bush Gang to make killing Saddam Hussein a bad thing.

Excelsior,

Arthur

There's a community called 50bookchallenge on livejournal, for which you try to read 50 books a year and list them all. I read more than 50 books in 2006. These are the ones I'd list.

The Long Tail  
Let Me Finish  
Cosmopolitanism  
Anthony Powell: A Life  
Too Much of a Good Thing Is Wonderful  
Writing Home  
Untold Stories  
Rhetorical Occasions  
What's Liberal about the Liberal Arts?  
Tulia  
Synthetic Worlds  
American Bloomsbury  
Blue Monday  
The Onion Girl  
Regards  
Middlemarch  
Always Magic in the Air  
The Man Who Would Marry Susan Sontag  
The Dragon Waiting  
The Ode Less Travelled  
Adventures in the Dream Trade  
Leonard Woolf  
Camouflage  
Defining the World  
The Accidental Masterpiece  
The Judgment of Paris  
The Female Thing  
One Hand Jerking  
The Reckless Mind  
All Governments Lie!  
Ladies and Gentlemen, the Bronx Is Burning  
The Man from the Diogenes Club  
Tertium Organum  
James Tiptree jr.  
Virginity or Death  
Fortune's Formula  
American Scream  
The Shakespeare Wars  
Mathematicians in Love  
The Android's Dream  
13 Ways of Looking at the Novel  
Forbidden Faith  
Accelerando  
The 50 Greatest Yankee Games  
Point to Point Navigation  
Rainbows End  
Madame Blavatsky's Baboon  
What Jesus Meant  
After the Victorians  
Soundings

Christopher Anderson  
Roger Angell  
Kwame Anthony Appiah  
Michael Barber  
Regina Barreca  
Alan Bennett  
Alan Bennett  
Michael Bérubé  
Michael Bérubé  
Nate Blakeslee  
Edward Castronova  
Susan Cheever  
Rick Coleman  
Charles de Lint  
John Gregory Dunne  
George Eliot  
Ken Emerson  
Edward Field  
John M. Ford  
Stephen Fry  
Neil Gaiman  
Victoria Glendenning  
Joe Haldeman  
Henry Hitchings  
Michael Kimmelman  
Ross King  
Laura Kipnis  
Paul Krassner  
Mark Lilla  
Myra MacPherson  
Jonathan Mahler  
Kim Newman  
P.D. Ouspensky  
Julie Phillips  
Katha Pollitt  
William Poundstone  
Jonah Raskin  
Ron Rosenbaum  
Rudy Rucker  
John Scalzi  
Jane Smiley  
Richard Smoley  
Charles Stross  
Cecilia Tan  
Gore Vidal  
Vernor Vinge  
Peter Washington  
Garry Wills  
A.N. Wilson  
Gary K. Wolfe