

NICE DISTINCTIONS



Nice Distinctions 22

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This is Discordian Regimentation #122, a Church of the SuperGenius publication. In Wile E. we trust.

The recent excitement here was a nasty lung condition, but a series of high-tech probes looked into my lungs and, like the famous X-ray of Dizzy Dean's head, found nothing. A change of meds stopped the continual coughing, and I seem to be fairly healthy.

I also remain in livejournal, as **supergee**. That too has seemed problematic, as lj operates out of Russia, and the government there dislikes it and has tried various high-tech attacks on it. In reply, members were encouraged to remain in order not to let the oppressors win. When I was in elementary school in the 50s, they told me that some day I would fight Russian tyranny. I had almost given up hope.

Facebook has remained annoying, and Google+, invented to challenge it, has its own problems. It's evidence for Robert Conquest's "All organizations appear to be run by agents of their enemies":

"Hey, Facebook, why don't you keep changing your format as soon as people get comfortable with the old one?"

"OK, Google+, if you'll take the stupid real names policy we pretend to have and really enforce it."

(For one thing, you must have two names. Sukarno and Suharto had absolute power over hundreds of millions of people, but couldn't get into Google+.)

Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, being the size of a nation-state, decided that it too should have its own espionage operations. That decision proved unpopular. Recently Murdoch himself discovered Twitter and has been signing on late at night, making statements that lack the discretion of his PR department. Perhaps he is becoming his own Martha Mitchell.

Resistance is futile

Science fiction prepares us for the future. In 1974, I read a new book called *The Mote in God's Eye*. One character was sly, swarthy, and hook-nosed; his sneakiness and greed propelled much of the plot. That sort of character was quite familiar, but this time he was an Arab, instead of a Jew. (In fact, his middle name was Hussein; you can't make this stuff up.)

Nowadays, much of America fears Arabs and/or Muslims, and one strategy to calm our fears is for them to "assimilate." As I heard that, I thought that some of the methods they could use have been tried and tested: They can change their names and have their noses surgically Christianized. And then I remembered something else.

As a Jew, I came in when things were getting better. I have read about Walter Lippmann, a generation before me, who probably earned a place in the Guinness Book of Records for most organizations he was the First Jew in. The price he paid was assimilation: He couldn't be "too Jewish," and he had to join in condemning those who were.

I was born at the time when Adolf Hitler was bringing Jew hating into unprecedented disrepute. He was even nastier to the Jews than genteel gentiles found reasonable, he fought a war against America, and he lost. Finally, Lippmann could condemn him without adding fair and balanced bits about the Jews who did the sociopolitical equivalent of dressing provocatively.

But we weren't equal yet. In the 50s I attended a prep school with a 90% Jewish student body. I got a good education; we provided many of New York's doctors, lawyers, and business leaders. Along with English, math, and science, though, we had to take a course called Speech, which I now realize should have been called Gentile Emulation.

Mr. Baruth (widely believed to have been born Baruch) told us: Don't make Jew Gestures; avoid the dentalized T; don't sound like a "cloak & suiter" (stereotypical Jewish garment merchant). Prepare to be assimilated.

Some Jews say, "We had to do it; they should have to." Some say, "We had to do it; nobody should have to." I am one of the latter.

Schooling

I come from a family of teachers and unsurprisingly think they take too much of the blame. The school system has a set of goals as incompatible as those of the prison system (not the only thing the two have in common). The teachers are supposed to Leave No Child Behind, a goal that makes as much sense in schooling as it would in a track meet. They are evaluated on the performance of their students on an objective test (a grotesque idea in itself) and then told they must not teach for the test. They are subject to the pressures of idiots who want their offspring protected from godless heliocentrism evolution. Their unions are probably no worse about protecting incompetent and harmful members than the AMA. None of the critics has a clear idea of what they should do, but everyone knows they're doing it wrong.

Tim Tebow went into a field where he seemed to lack professional qualifications, but he gave it heroic effort and beat more experienced and seemingly more talented rivals. That's right; he was voted Top Religion Author of 2011.

It has been remarked that Tebow isn't the first to pray flamboyantly on the football field, just as Joe Namath wasn't the first player to have a mustache. Black players have been falling on their knees in the end zone for years. As officiating expert Mike Pereira pointed out, that is the only time the No Fun League rules allow you to go to the ground after a score because "There is not an official around who wants to penalize God."

The last white NFL player to be as openly Christian as Tim Tebow was Bob Timberlake, drafted by the Giants in 1965, the same year the Jets picked Namath. He was a bad quarterback, but an even worse placekicker, missing 14 consecutive field goals. In fact, he was bad enough to be historically important. He was so bad that the next year the Giants violated the "gentleman's agreement" not to

sign players from the AFL, picking up placekicker Pete Gogolak, which eventually led to the AFL-NFL agreement.

Having failed as a football player, Rev. Timberlake appears to be a much better human being. According to his Wikipedia entry, he has devoted himself to community service, particularly affordable housing, on which he leads programs and teaches courses.

However Tim Tebow does on the football field, I would not be surprised to see him wind up similarly, as he seems to be the sort of Christian who reads parts of the Bible other than the ones about keeping women in their place and smiting men who lie with men.

There is of course no such thing as Darwinism, any more than there is Newtonism or Mendelism; evolution is simply a confirmed part of science. Nevertheless, there is Vulgar Darwinism, the belief that our nature as evolved beings rigidly determines our behavior in ways that coincidentally resemble the most cherished beliefs of the speaker. Competition and cooperation are two popular oversimplifications, but the term *evolutionary psychology* usually goes to the form that proclaims sexual dimorphism as the Truth of Our Nature that it is simultaneously virtuous and scientifically correct to follow and enforce.

I await the arrival of Ev. Psych's own Frederick C. Crews,* the former true believer who will turn against the old faith as Crews did with the teachings of Pope Sigmund, and be so nasty as almost to inspire sympathy.

* Or as Chris Berman might call him, Frederick "Won't You Let Me Take You on a" C. Crews.

Fanny May

The past or subjunctive (counterfactual) of the auxiliary verb *may* is *might*. If you say "she may have" done something and then make clear that she didn't, you force literate readers to go back and figure out what you were trying to say.

Truth in packaging

What do you call a group responsible for 8 murders, 17 attempted murders, 383 death threats, 153 incidents of assault or battery, and 3 kidnappings and since 1977 in the United States and Canada ... 173 arsons, 91

attempted bombings or arsons, 619 bomb threats, 1630 incidents of trespassing, 1264 incidents of vandalism, and 100 attacks with butyric acid (“stink bombs”)?

They call themselves pro-life.

Demographic Vistas

I’m one of those awful American males who love the Toy Department known as Sports and don’t want the real world getting in the way when the NFL is on the tube. When Pope John Paul I ~~was poisoned~~ died suddenly after deciding to investigate the Vatican Bank, his funeral preempted the NFL. The announcer said that watching the funeral, even on TV, gave the viewer one indulgence. However, I figured that wishing they’d get the goddam thing over with so I could watch the game was a mortal sin, so it was a wash.

On the tenth anniversary of 9/11 the CBS reading of the names of its victims ran into the time for scheduled football, but there was also a game on Fox, so I merely had to wait a bit to switch back and forth during commercials. A friend watched the 9/11 ceremony on purpose and later told me that the only bad thing was the way CBS kept doing voiceovers to apologize that the reading was running longer than expected. I guess for once I’m in a popular demographic.

Two of my favorite writers, Robert Anton Wilson and Rudy Rucker (whose autobio, *Nested Scrolls*, everyone should read), invite us to consider the possibility that all entities have mental and/or spiritual aspects, perhaps even souls. I don’t consider that inherently impossible, but I wonder how we could go about determining it. The Turing tests I have been giving the rest of the world since around the time Alan Turing defined the concept convince me that other people (regardless of trivialities like sex and color) have souls, and that animals are likely to have something similar if a bit simpler, but how would we decide the question for rocks, trees, etc.?

On the other hand, scientific method is appropriate for dealing with things without souls. As John M. Ford pointed out, alchemy is a way of treating metals as if they had souls, but how would we know if it’s the right one? The alchemists might have thought that Mendeleev’s periodic table would be a rack on which the poor entities would be stretched

and broken, but it could just as well have been a hive of comforting, form-fitting beds.

On the third appendage, I feel comfortable denying the possibility of souls to “society,” governments, corporations, ethnicities, and the sentient classes imagined by that Lovecraftian fantast Karl Marx.

When I worked in the criminal courts in the War on Poverty, I learned that Contributing to the Delinquency of Minors is now a misdemeanor, unlike Socrates’ day, when it was a capital crime. Last year around Christmas I encountered a similar bit of progress. There was a report of three people being arrested for illegally feeding the homeless, but they weren’t crucified.

Operas can be made out of seemingly unlikely material, such as Philip K. Dick’s *Valis*. So I was not surprised to learn that there is going to be a William S. Burroughs opera. I guess someone is stabbed to death, but instead of bleeding he utters random words cut out of other books.

Equal opportunity

It is possible to be a racist about the entire human race. PETA believes, or purports to believe, that all human beings, regardless of race, creed, or prior condition of servitude, are no better than animals. And some believe that our ancestors should have Just Said No to agriculture, so we could all be happy, carefree savages, eating and sleeping better and not hurting our little brains with hard things like literature and science. Me, I’m with John Stuart Mill: I’d rather be a dissatisfied philosopher.

When a pickpocket looks at a saint, he sees pockets. When a fashion commentator looks at a secretary of state, he sees fashion. But the TV networks are smart enough not to let the pickpockets share their opinions with the rest of us.

Why we can’t have nice things #n:

The death penalty

There is a really annoying petty irony to being falsely accused of failing to return the library’s copy of *Convicting the Innocent*. I’ve settled that, though, and now I want to put in a plug for the book, which is written by Brandon L. Garrett and published by Harvard.

Convicting the Innocent studies the cases of 150 people who did serious prison time and have since been proven innocent beyond a reasonable doubt by DNA evidence. It shows the problems with confessions, eyewitness testimony, and perhaps worst of all, jailhouse snitches.

For a long time, I was neutral on the death penalty. I don't have strong feelings about it, but most people do, in ways that cannot be settled by further factual evidence. What I do have strong feelings about is making sure we've got the actual perp, especially if we're going to kill the person we convict, and this book, and the specific case of Troy Davis, have convinced me that as long as there's a death penalty, we're going to kill innocent people, or at least people we aren't sure enough about.

Connie Willis has won SFWA's Grand Master award. Richly deserved, of course. In fact, it's overdue. Not only did she have the credentials years ago, but she has already written the sort of book one does after establishing Grand Mastership. *Blackout/All Clear* has all the signs: It's extra-long (in fact, it's in two parts ~~like my ass~~), it's set in the old familiar territory, and it's a good-parts version* in which the author does lots of what she does well and enjoys while skimming on what she doesn't (in this case, research on the ancient World War II period in the exotic United Kingdom). And as ever, the book is appreciated by purchasers and Hugo voters despite the complaints of critics.

* Thanks to Darrell Schweitzer for noticing what a useful term William Goldman's phrase is for discussing an approach to writing.

Nasty, Brutish, & Short

I used to be proud to defend pornography. Now I still think it should continue to exist, but I have to admit that it keeps getting nastier. I feel exactly the same about Israel.

We are the costumes the Universe puts on to play with Itself.

Not a delight

Orhan Pamuk has been fined for "insulting Turkishness." In a gesture of solidarity, I remind my readers that *à la Turc* is a French term for buggery.

Puttanesca sauce means what I thought it did. What about MF Global?

Behaviorism is a branch of philosophy that seems to have passed out of style without taking its major assumptions along with it—**Marilynne Robinson**

When life gives you lemmas, make theorems.

I know that theophobia doesn't work like homophobia, but wouldn't it be a hoot if Richard Dawkins were photographed sneaking into a high mass?

Is "Why shouldn't a Jew answer a question with a question?" a Zen cohen?

We do metafiction; you do recursive fiction; they do fanfic.

pomographic: unfit to read because of excessive postmodernist verbiage.

A major bank is now calling itself Wells Fargo. It's the stagecoach that robs you.

Not Forgotten

I didn't read a lot by **Anne McCaffrey**, but then I wasn't part of her target audience. Starting out in *Analog*, she welcomed a couple of generations of teenage girls into science fiction, thus joining *Star Trek* in making sf into less of a boys' club, for which I for one am grateful. As Steve Green pointed out, she was born in April 1926, which means she was the exact same age as modern science fiction.

As a veteran of **Sargent Shriver's** Bleeding Hearts Club Band (VISTA), I mourn our leader.

Christopher Hitchens's *Unacknowledged Legislation* is a remarkable collection of literary essays; I recommend it unreservedly. I recommend most of his other stuff reservedly. For instance, I enjoyed his memoir, *Hitch-22*, partly by the expedient of skipping the Iraq chapter. There was also an element of implacable vendetta in his work (were the Clintons really that monstrous?) and some utter stupidities like that provocation about women not being funny. Also the apparent belief that religion is utter evil and pretty

much the only source of it. (Al Sharpton told him, "Weapons of mass destruction in Iraq: now *that's* faith based.) Still he said that Dubya is "unusually incurious, abnormally unintelligent, amazingly inarticulate, fantastically uncultured, extraordinarily uneducated, and apparently quite proud of all these things" and knew that the four most overrated things are picnics, lobster, champagne, and anal sex.

Brilliant innovator, but also asshole. Rebel against authority who ran his own shop like a petty dictator: **Steve Jobs**. Also **Al Davis**.

Before Bill Cosby, we had to have Stepin Fetchit. Before realistic sympathetic characters who happen to love people with the same sort of plumbing, we had to have **Alan Sues** prancing on *Laugh-In*.

Siobhan Reynolds had the radical idea that doctors should be allowed to give patients as much pain killer as they need. That started lots of trouble.

Bob Sabella did good fanzines and put in yeoman service as Official Editor of the Fantasy Amateur Press Association.

Like her husband, **Betty Ford** was a good person who seemed even better in comparison to those around her. My lasting symbolic image of her comes from the 1992 Republican convention. The Republicans had finally deigned to notice AIDS and invited an "innocent" victim, Mary Fisher, to address them. Fisher reported that Betty Ford was the only person she saw there with a red AIDS ribbon.

My favorite **Wilfrid Sheed** book was *The House That George Built*, about the music I hated as grown-up oppressor stuff until I heard the noise the kids now listen to.

Harold Garfinkel created ethnomethodology, in which experimenters studied normal behavior by confounding expectations: "How are you?" "Compared to what?"

Vaclav Havel brought democracy to Czechoslovakia, inspired by Frank Zappa and the Velvet Underground. ~~No telling what he could have done if he'd listened to the good stuff.~~

Lynn Margulis was an uppity woman who disagreed with the male establishment. Since her field was science, she had more chance than most to be proven right, and that's how it turned out.

Harry Morgan was in lots of TV shows. I remember him from *December Bride*, and most people remember him from *MASH*. He also was one of Sgt. Joe Friday's *Dragnet* sidekicks, and he started out in *High Noon*.

A decade before Stonewall, **Franklin Kameny** campaigned for gay rights.

Edmund Carpenter worked with Marshall McLuhan and wrote two excellent books: *Oh, What a Blow That Phantom Gave Me!* and *They Became What They Beheld*.

Peter Gent turned a few years as a mediocre tight end with the Dallas Cowboys into a successful novel called *North Dallas Forty*. Later efforts *Texas Celebrity Turkey Trot* and *The Franchise* were less plausible but also fun.

Russell Hoban wrote *Riddley Walker* and lots of enjoyable children's books. I liked **Shelagh Delaney's** *A Taste of Honey*. **Carl Oglesby** gave us the useful political metaphor of Yankees vs. Cowboys. **Ronald Searle**: The St. Trinian's girls were already in black. **Andrea True** started out in porn but slipped into disco. **Norman Corwin** wrote nice radio plays and lived past 100. Good for him.

Also, **John Mackey, Dick Williams, LeeRoy Selmon, Dan Hoey, Fred Shuttlesworth, Orlando Brown, Andy Carey, Hugh Carey, Don Chandler, Martin Harry Greenberg, John Henry Johnson, Jay Landesman, Tom Wicker, Christopher Logue, Easy Ed Macauley, Don Mueller, Eugene McDaniels, Sylvia Robinson, Theodore Roszak, Gil Scott-Heron, Darrell K. Sweet, Chuck Tanner, Ilya Zhitomirskiy.**

Thanx to Brad W. Foster for another delightful cover.

Excelsior,

Arthur