

Nice Distinctions 25

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This is Discordian Regimentation #125, a Church of the SuperGenius publication. In Wile E. we trust.

Another year, another zine. Let's start with a report on

Detcon 1

Bernadette Bosky, Kevin Maroney, and I were jointly the Fan Guest of Honor at the recent North American Science Fiction Convention (Cerberus, or to be more up-to-date, Fluffy). I imagine we were chosen because amongst us we represent most of the interests the con celebrates: me, reading science fiction and doing fanzines; Bernadette, horror and fantasy and scholarship thereof; Kevin, comics and games and years of yeoman service with *The New York Review of Science Fiction*. Besides, like the futuristic Detroit Renaissance Center where the con was held, we *are* science fiction: Back in the day, marriages of more than two people were Buck Rogers Stuff.

Fanzines have a tradition of lengthy descriptions of the travel to the con to which I will now pay minimal tribute: Delta has managed to extend to the waiting room the discomfort, crowdedness, and noise of actually being on a plane. And one more note on what escape fiction is designed to escape from: We learned that Rupert Murdoch plans to assimilate Time Warner. Speaking for the Warner Bros. Toons, Wile E. Coyote said, "It gives us a new appreciation of Ted Turner."

Because fans are time-binding slans, I was on three program items before the Opening Ceremonies. The first was on SF and Romance, featuring four fiction

writers and one reader (me). When I suggested James Tiptree Jr.'s great theme of sex with space aliens, the others thought that the aliens would be so alien that the pheromones wouldn't work and their bodily fluids might poison us or vice versa. (Not a question that we can research.) Thence to a panel on the ancient fannish tradition of the amateur press association (apa), which has proven even more vulnerable to the Internet than fanzines. I enjoyed apas because I could just retype other people's writing and make wiseass comments on it, but on livejournal I can just cut & paste the link and not even type. The next hour was a panel on paper and net writing that I shared with Mark Oshiro; his blog invites us to watch as Mark Reads, which turns out to be significantly more fun than the title suggests.

Kevin did a panel on book collecting, which I skipped because I am a recovering book collector. More precisely, I am a recovering book hoarder, who loved to buy lots & lots. I am getting better, and it beats animal hoarding. Books don't fight or crap on each other.

And then the con opened. Authors are warned not to do characterization by putting characters in funny hats, but putting authors in funny hats seems to work: Jim C. Hines was a great master of ceremonies. Since the con was in the Motor City, one theme was that archetypal Failed SF Prophecy, the flying car, including a song by Filk GoHs Bill & Brenda Sutton. I admitted that the flying car theme has never worked for me: When I see how well my fellow citizens

operate in two dimensions, I have no desire to be in or under such things.

Friday I got up fannishly late and didn't get to much programming. I did make it to an excellent panel on Maps in Fantasy with Kevin and f/sf writer and old-time fannish friend Stephen Leigh. (Like a number of people there, Steve is someone I have known for more than half my life, which is a weird thought.) We intended to get together later at the con, but did not in fact do so. (I do that a lot, always have.)

I likewise had only one all-too-brief meeting with Maia Cowan, but fortunately we got to spend more time with Eva Whitley, Jeanne Mealy & John Stanley, Lisa Padol & Josh Kronengold, Larry Kestenbaum & Janice Gutfreund, and Neil Rest, who told me that the difference between liberals and progressives is that liberals still believe the other side is acting in good faith. I continue to identify as a liberal, but by that metric I am a progressive.

In lieu of a Guest of Honor speech, the three of us interviewed one another. We talked about our fannish lives, our mundane lives, our totems, our ménage àrie, our pet rats, and much else, and I believe we amused, instructed, and enlightened.

In the evening there was a Meet the Pros reception, for values of *pro* including the Fan GoHs, so we sat at a table and were met. I also wandered around and met John Scalzi, who remembered without prompting that I had copy-edited one of his books (the delightful *Android's Dream*). I informed him that he was the only writer who thanked me for that particular service (he also mentioned me on a credits page), and we had a most pleasant chat. We also hung out with a new friend, the alarmingly energetic Pablo Vazquez.

Saturday was Bernadette's day to panelize, as Thursday was mine. It began with

a panel on the classics of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. With our help Bernadette had compiled two-page lists of contenders in each of the fields (and of course we left things out). The panel discussed such issues as how old classics have to be and whether classics have to be still readable. Thence to panels on dark fantasy/sf and on sexuality in sf.

The three of us then performed "The Island of Dr. Gernsback." Back in the 80s Bernadette and I wrote a fannish parody of the Saying of the Law from *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, in which I recited the fannish shibboleths of the time and the audience chanted, "Are we not fen?" For the new millennium we deleted some forgotten bits and added up-to-date references and things the tribe should have known all along (costume is not consent). Kevin occasionally joined in with wiseass kibitzing. We think it went over well, and we're putting it up on efanazines.

Then we watched a panel on Afrofuturism. YA Writer GoH Nnedi Okorafor gave an example of how our community has much to learn on such questions, informing us that she had been asked, "You've got Anansi in your book. Did you get that from *American Gods*?" (Besides, I have a feeling of kinship with her because her name begins with a non-Anglo grapheme.)

Sunday's panels returned to another 80s theme: The Fat, Feminism, and Fandom panel. Back then fandom prided itself on the modest achievement of being ahead of mundane society on questions of fat acceptance (as it was on race, GLBT, and other issues), but we still had a way to go, and Debbie Notkin and Laurie Toby Edison put together educational panels. Now Laurie, Bernadette, Eva Whitley, Rachael Acks, and I talked about progress in that area. The next hour Lee Martindale, Rachael Acks (again), and J.F. Garrard joined Bernadette to discuss the current status of research on the

subject, and much useful information was imparted. (BMI is a statistic of near-astrological precision.)

Perhaps surprisingly, there was no programming after the Closing Ceremonies, but we did attend a dead dog party thrown by fannish legend Geri Sullivan (who got her first fanzine ever from me). We enjoyed it, hanging out with Larry Sanderson, Peggy Rae Sapienza, Dick & Leah Zeldes Smith, and others. Next day we survived flight and even the TSA and returned home.

All in all, Detcon 1 was a delightful experience. Tammy Coxen, Kim Kofmel, and the whole gang put on a great show, and we are proud and happy to have been a part of it.

Moon landing

Forty-five years ago, we took a great leap for mankind. And then we punked out. If I believed in collective guilt, I would say that we as a species deserve to be imprisoned in our environment until we inevitably die of it.

The NY Post has blamed Obama for passing the buck to Congress. Their original plan was to blame Obama for ignoring Congress.

Gated community

There are apparently some boys who think that the geek world needs “gatekeepers” to keep out the “fake geek girls,” and they volunteer. John Scalzi, speaking as a creator of what fannish culture is about, says, “Thanks, but no thanks.”

I’m not a creator; I’m a consumer. I was and am a straight cis white male nerd with low social skills (for a mammal). I joined the community in the 70s when *Star Trek* had allegedly lowered the property values by bringing in lotsa women. And I have always been grateful to them. Instead of an overwhelmingly male culture where women were rare and

fought over, I was in a nearly balanced community. I like that kind better: there is less symbolic mine’s-bigger-than-yours, and I like associating with women. Furthermore, to reduce the issue to the most selfish and personal level, because there weren’t a lot of men competing for a few women, that meant I could get laid.

That’s no longer an issue for me, but I still like having lots of women around. Gatekeepers, go protect someone else.

Birth control is one of the best parts of human exceptionalism. We can use our unique abilities in language and science to ensure that the females of our species don’t keep dropping babies till they drop dead.

Pre and de

There is an endless war between the prescriptivists, who think that Rules are the most important thing, and descriptivists, who think that language is a great place for majority vote. Between this Scylla and Charybdis, there are those of us who want language to be a good tool, flexible and not encumbered by ancient strictures, but precise where it has to be: *disinterested* and *literally* are excellent words as long as they mean what they mean and not what a lot of people would vote for.

I thought I saw hope in *Lingua Franca*, an attack on “zombie rules” that included good old split infinitive & terminal preposition and approved nothing worse than the mildly annoying “bored of,” until it got to the tenth and last, accepting “try and,” a usage almost Republican in its stupidity. You don’t do two things—try and do—you try *to* do something. That’s almost as bad as the “horrible little oven mitt”^{*} Yoda saying “There is no try.”

^{*}Thank you, David Brin

Someone says postmodernism killed Andy Warhol’s avant-garde. If it weren’t for the zombie craze, I wouldn’t have

known that sometimes it's necessary to kill a brainless thing that's already dead.

The other sex is not mysterious. Avoid people who think it is.

Keeping it unreal

Discordians believe that Yossarian is a higher-level saint than Allen Ginsberg because fictional people are capable of greater perfection than real ones. The heretical Church of the SuperGenius (me) keeps that tenet of the mother church and does not accept the evaluative use of the word *real*.

Some well-intentioned people noticed the stupid idea that all women should be thin and reacted with "Real women have curves," as if thin women aren't real and "real" means "better," neither of which is true. Likewise, real food.

Kennedy assassination theory (without evidence)

After the assassination, the FBI was called in. They didn't know who did it, but they suspected that some of their people might be involved, so they destroyed evidence, just to be on the safe side. The CIA was called in. They didn't know who did it, but they suspected that some of their people might be involved, so they destroyed evidence, just to be on the safe side. One or more other hush-hush government operations did likewise. So now we no longer have the means to demonstrate the connection between the killing and its true mastermind: Fidel Castro.

Charlie Stross says justice is a religion. I think he's got something there. Primates appear to like fairness. As symbol-using primates, people can also figure out ways to make that come out the way we want it to (e.g., fairness for people of our color). Fundamentalists of this particular faith, as Robert Nozick became famous for pointing out, are as eager to regulate financial relations between consenting

adults as the more traditional sort of fundamentalists are to regulate sexual ones.

Prison-Industrial

Perhaps a heavy-handed sf satirist, trying to create a dystopia combining the worst of free enterprise and the state, might have imagined the grotesque idea of turning the prisons over to private companies. She might then have imagined a War on Some Drugs to support the industry. But could she have been sick enough to dream up a plot twist where the prisons sued the government for not arresting enough people? The Corrections Corporation of America has done just that.

Gladwell All Over

Seems like everybody's mad at Malcolm Gladwell for *David and Goliath*. They complain about the facile moralizing and sloppy detail work, and they put him on lists with the likes of Thomas Friedman and Richard Cohen. Me, I felt that way about *Outliers* and find this one a little less annoying and with more good parts.

Carol Tavis, the author of *The Mismeasure of Woman*, pointed out that there's no money in books about the similarities between the sexes. Likewise, there's no money in books about how people can succeed if they have ability, so Gladwell takes the opposite tack and tells us some enjoyable stuff along the way. My favorite part may be something he didn't intend. We learn that a leading officer of Goldman Sachs is a pushy prick who can't read and lied his way into at least his first job. It's no less than I expected of the organization.

The Apple of Good and Evil

File 770 reminds us that this is the thirtieth anniversary of the commercial that introduced the Macintosh. I don't remember how I felt about it at the time, but now I am tempted to see it as the Fall.

John Clute has written about that terrible stuff he calls First SF, characterized as a view of the material world as a series of problems to be solved. When I read that, I thought, "Oh, so that's why I love it." I don't actually have autism or Asperger's; I live in my mind and deal with the world, rather than living in the world like we're supposed to. First SF dreamed of being better at that, and some of us ran with it: We'd be safer from the elements, live longer and better, have machines doing the dull stuff, turn sex from a deadly serious business (Eric Berne called it a giant squid) into shared pleasure, escape the giant prison at the bottom of the gravity well....

And we would have computers. Well, First SF mostly thought we would have A Computer, but for once reality outstripped the dream: Everybody could have one. And they would do more than compute: We could use words, as well as numbers, to deal with the material world from a safe distance.

Then came the Commercial. Now there would be a computer for the rest of them. No more hard words and numbers; computers would have pictures; maybe the pictures would even move! Perhaps some day computers would be just like television! Or better: you could push and pull the stuff on the screen instead of having to use words with it. (I love being able to utter a simple incantation like CTRL-C rather than d-r-a-g things.) In retrospect, what it reminded me of was 1967 and that godawful song telling people to come to San Francisco with flowers in their hair: It brought a lot of Them into what used to be a place for Us.

I am absolutely not saying that the influx was all bad. Two of the best and smartest people I have ever known, my beloved cohusband Kevin and the late Robert Anton Wilson, love the touchable computer. I have no idea how many of the people I now enjoy interacting with online wouldn't be here if all we had was the old kind of PC, but I'll bet it's a lot. But just

as "science fiction" has gone from words and ideas on a page to action and special effects on a screen, so a "computer" can now be a handheld interactive TV. And it isn't safe any more: Outside forces are running programs on our computers all time, and we must defend ourselves against the bad ones. Still, we have not lost the ability to read science fiction or use words on computers. (I'm doing it right now.)

One thing I learned from *File 770*: For years no one could show the commercial for fear of lawsuits from the George Orwell estate. Imagine a copyright lawyer stamping on a human face forever.

Once again the death reports pile up, so I'm doing the list in two parts, and once again I yield to the fanocentric temptation to start with

Worldcon in the Sky

Frederik Pohl was thrown out of a Worldcon before I was born and won the Fan Writer Hugo a few years ago. Between those fannish milestones he wrote *The Space Merchants* (with C.M. Kornbluth), *Gateway*, "Day Million," and much, much more. As an editor, he did wonders for *Galaxy* and made *Dhalgren* and *The Female Man* (among others) Frederik Pohl Selections at Bantam Books.

One more thing he did: At a 70s Milford conference a new writer named Gustav Hasford brought in a work of military sf. Pohl suggested he redo it as mimetic fiction. He did so and called it *The Short-Timers*, and Pohl, in his editorial role, bought it for Bantam. It was then filmed as *Full Metal Jacket*.

Delphyne Joan Woods aka **Joan Hanke-Woods**. I had the pleasure and honor of publishing a couple of her covers and some other illos.

Elliot Shorter, fannish good guy, gone peacefully and not unexpectedly. I didn't

know him terribly well, but I liked him. I loved hearing him sing “Teddy Bear’s Picnic” at a FISTFA meeting.

The Power went out

Frank M. Robinson, writer of and about sf, *Playboy* Advisor, Harvey Milk speech-writer, Tuckerized CIA infiltrator of the NYPD in *Illuminatus!*

Mark Rogers did those nifty Samurai Cat books.

Martha Bartter did wonders for the International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts.

Jay Lake wrote a lot of good stuff and inspired us with his fight against cancer.

Leland Sapiro

Riverside Quarterly was one of the first zines I saw, back in the 70s. It was, as we said, sercon: serious, constructive, academic. For me, Sturgeon’s approximation applied: solemn studies of ancient, historically important pre-sf, with maybe one really nifty article on someone like PKD and some good stuff in the lettercol. It helped lure me into the subculture. The zine faded away long ago, and now Leland has.

Doris Lessing, the first Worldcon GoH to win the Nobel Prize, knew that literary realism was a temporary fad in a small part of the world.

I enjoyed hanging out online with **Marilee Layman**.

I knew **Bhob Stewart** from *The Realist* long before I was in fandom.

Back in the old millennium, Bernadette reviewed science fiction for *Publishers Weekly*. One of the books she received was a novel about one of America’s most mythic nonfictional figures, Robert Johnson. *Bone Music*, by **Alan Rodgers**, was

worthy of its subject, a powerful work of Gringo Magic Realism. Unfortunately, it came from an off-brand publisher and appears to have disappeared without a trace. I tried a few of his other books, but they did not strike me as having the same mojo. Alas, Rodgers has now died, after much illness. Someone should bring back *Bone Music*.

William H. Patterson Jr., the author of the thorough and essential two-volume Heinlein biography, died just before it was published.

Colin Wilson’s vaulting imagination made him an enjoyable sf writer, but got in the way when he thought he was writing nonfiction.

and also **Aaron Allston, Patricia Anthony, Neal Barrett Jr., Thomas Berger, John Boyd, Kathleen Randolph Conat, Ann C. Crispin, Judy Harrow, James Herbert, Ericka Johnson, Daniel Keyes, Lucius Shepard, Steven Utley, Michael Waite**

For me libertarianism feels like a great temptation. It’s right about many things (sex laws, drug laws, state snooping, meddling in Asia), and it offers the dream of running the world without all that sordid politics. But it doesn’t work.

Still, libertarianism has much to offer. Many libertarians recognize that the corporation is not merely not a person but a gross intervention in the free market by the state. Radley Balko’s libertarian distrust of the cops makes him an invaluable resource. And Justin Raimondo, though he describes himself as “Pat Buchanan’s #1 gay supporter” (he admits there isn’t much competition), has a long and honorable history of opposing all the interventionist offspring of Woodrow Wilson’s wet dream of imposing democracy on the entire world.

The hell you say

I grew up secular, and my introduction to the concept of Hell was *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. My immediate reaction was, “These Christians are bloody savages!” I have a mathematician’s understanding of infinity, and the idea of an alleged deity torturing people forever, for real crimes let alone for pulling their pudding, struck me as monstrous, especially if, as John Calvin believed, He created them so that they couldn’t help pulling their pudding.

Of course, I have since learned that many Christians have managed to retain the good parts of their religion while believing that Hell is metaphorical, or there really isn’t anyone sentenced to it, or it isn’t the kind of infinity I’m thinking of. People are always capable of being better (or worse) than the systems they belong to.

To my utter lack of surprise, a study has shown that belief in Hell makes people less happy.

I’ll get the bad news out of the way first. Saul Austerlitz’s *Sitcom* (a history thereof) does not devote a chapter to *The Addams Family*; in fact, it mentions the show only once, in a parenthetical, not distinguishing it from *feh!* *The Munsters*.

Otherwise, it’s good, tracing 24 other shows, with particular attention to cross-reference and self-reference. *The New Yorker* has discussed the book and how *All in the Family* changed things by complicating our reaction to the characters. When *All in the Family* came out, Old Leftist John Leonard hated it because it acted as if the white working class were full of people stupid enough to take it seriously and root for Archie, which is what happened.

Burroughing

I heard about William Burroughs in my teenage years. I was at an age where I’d be interested in anything by a homosexual druggie who’d written a book full

of dirty words. And there was even more to it than that: He was the kind of mysterious figure that fortunately no longer exists in my part of the world: the victim of censorship, telling capital-T Truths capital-T They wouldn’t allow us to hear.

When They finally let me read *Naked Lunch*, I agreed that it was a masterpiece—a magnificent collage of widely varied but almost always brilliant imagery held together by striking wit and a morbidly fascinating sensibility. I think it also was his One Book. Later works didn’t add to it, and they made it more obvious that he did not like women. At his worst, he called the whole sex a “mistake” and wrote books like *The Wild Boys* fantasizing about slaughtering them all and all the men who’d been contaminated by them (not unlike a Halloween movie). At best, he tolerated them.

Call Me Burroughs, by Barry Miles, is an excellent and thorough bio. It reinforces my view of the three Beat Generation superstars: Ginsberg was a saint, Kerouac was a turd, and Burroughs was a sicko. We read much about his mental adventures in Scientology and worse.

And it leaves us with a familiar problem: What do we do about great work by horrible people? I can’t even decide whether the craziness is mitigating or exacerbating. At least Ezra Pound never said that the Jews were specially created by evil insects from space.

When macho men hear about child molesting, they fantasize about beating up the perpetrator. When Social Justice Warriors hear about child molesting, they fantasize about making lots of arrests for bystanding with intent to enable.

A modern master

The University of Illinois’s Modern Masters of Science Fiction series, which began with Jad Smith’s excellent look at John Brunner, goes from strength to strength. The latest discusses Greg Egan,

author of such fascinating and thought-provoking works as *Permutation City* and *Distress*. Karen Burnham is bicultural: a thoughtful reader who can evaluate the literary qualities and a NASA scientist with the chops to discuss the recent work, which Egan himself suggests should be read with a pencil and paper at hand.

One definition of Heaven: Sex, drugs, and food have no consequences.

Not Forgotten

Mike Stein, Jeanne Myles, and Dick Gist were three of my favorite college classmates.

Sid Caesar was many delightfully funny people.

Alexander Shulgin: Better living through chemistry

Tom Clancy is dead. Tom Clancy product should continue unabated.

The *Times* obit of **Al Goldstein** briefly said, "He made pornography dirtier."

On television **James Garner** was Bret Maverick, then a Supreme Court Justice. That struck me as a reasonable progression.

Steven Gaskin said, "I experimented with drugs in the Sixties, and I didn't exhale." Likewise.

In the 50s **Van Cliburn** demonstrated that Americans could like a classical musician if he beat the Russians.

Mavis Batey helped Alan Turing save the Allies and then saved England's historic gardens.

Nelson Mandela eventually won.

De mortuis, my ass

Fred Phelps died in vain. Good riddance, and thanks for making homophobia look even stupider and crazier.

Charles Keating, who was famous for stomping smut before he became more famous for robbing widows and orphans, has been flushed from the bowl of life. Presumably mourned by John McCain and the rest of the Keating Five, and no one else.

Ariel Sharon officially died.

Richard Mellon Scaife met the one thing he couldn't buy off.

On the other hand

I forgive **Arthur C. Danto** for enabling Andy Warhol.

Game called

Paul Blair, Lou Brissie, Jim Brosnan (excellent writer), **Gates Brown, Rick Casares, Todd Christensen, Jerry Coleman, Art Donovan, Tom Gola, Tony Gwynn, Dick Kazmaier, Ralph Kiner, Johnny Kucks, Conrado Marrero** (aged 102), **Earl Morrall, Chuck Noll, Andy Pafko** (who was in Don De Lillo's *Underworld*), **Bum Phillips, George Scott, Roy Simmons, Virgil 'Fire' Trucks, Bob Turley, Bob Welch, Don Zimmer**

and also **Maya Angelou, Hurricane Carter, Ronald Coase, Ruby Dee, Oscar Dystel, David Frost, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Eydie Gormé, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Richard Hoggart, Bob Hoskins, Gabriel Kolko, Stephanie Kwolek, Elmore Leonard, Peter O'Toole, Patti Page, Ray Price, Harold Ramis, Mickey Rooney, Pete Seeger, William Weaver, Lewis Yablonsky, Efrem Zimbalist Jr.**

I remain on livejournal and Dreamwidth as **supergee**. All are invited to visit.

Excelsior,

Arthur