

NICE DISTINCTIONS 26

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

The print version is available for \$1 (\$2 outside the USA), arranged trade, or letter of comment (e-mail counts). If there is an X after your name on the envelope, send at least one of the above if you wish to receive the next issue. The e-mail version is available on request, in text and .pdf formats. Copyright © 2015 by Arthur D. Hlavaty. Staff: Bernadette Bosky, Kevin J. Maroney, Qala Devi, and the Valentine's Castle Rat Pack. Permission to reprint in any nonprofit publication is hereby granted, on condition that I am credited and sent a copy. This is Discordian Regimentation #126

Another opening, another show, or at least another issue. Bernadette Bosky, Kevin Maroney, and I continue to thrive.

An environment is a massively multi-player prisoner's dilemma: If you pee in the river, you win; if everybody pees in the river, everybody loses. (Another term for this problem is the Tragedy of the Commons.) The science fiction I grew up with told me that I was trapped in a body, which in turn was trapped in an environment and a society, and I loved it. (John Clute called it First SF and didn't like it because it treated the material world as a series of problems to be solved; that's why I loved it.)

But that leaves something out. I read Descartes and doubted everything but my mind, but I did not become a solipsist. (Solipsism, like homosexuality, can seem awfully tempting to some people who'd be disappointed if they actually tried it.) I decided that the possibility of everything out there being run by a single entity seemed less plausible than other apparent people actually being people, like me, with rich internal lives. I believe that you are trapped in a body, which in turn is trapped in an environment and a society. I like that; it means I'm not alone in a material world I find simultaneously scary and boring.

Of course there is a world out there, and we are supposed to believe in the objective view, or as Thomas Nagel calls it, the view from nowhere. The problem with the view from nowhere is that nobody has it. We are always imagining, approximating, hypothesizing, drawing distinctions and hoping that they work.

We have to keep doing it, though, because we are living in a set of prisoner's dilemmas: There are externalities, and the Market isn't going to resolve them for us, any more than God or the Dialectic will. We as a society must offer knowledge to everyone because we don't know who'll be able to use it for everyone's benefit. (Race and sex are really bad guesses.) There are those who want to think that the anti-vaxxers are all morons brainwashed by Fox News, but it turns out a lot of them merely haven't figured out that it's an externality too: Herd immunity means that they're endangering others by not having their kids vaccinated. And I think I know why so many other people like the sci-fi fantasy of flying cars: They haven't realized that everybody would have them.

Finked In

Two people I like personally and one I once contacted in my copy-editing role have apparently nagged me to join them in LinkedIn, even though I had already politely declined that offer. No means no, guys. But of course I know that this apparently pushy behavior is not something they are doing but an undocumented feature of allowing LinkedIn access to their mailing lists. Corporations are people, my friend, and LinkedIn is at least a socially offensive one if not as sociopathic as many.

Get used to it.

Gender is no longer determined by genital. We're reaching the point where a person's sex is what the person says it is. One

thing this means is unisex bathrooms, like the anti-ERA people warned us against. I feel like the guy who voted for Goldwater, and next thing he knew, we had half a million troops in Vietnam.

Symbol

There is a new (to me) uniform trade paperback edition of Kurt Vonnegut's books. On the spine of each, between the author's name and the title, is the author's drawing of an asshole.

Activism

In the 50s we needed an undemocratic, activist judiciary to end segregation.

In the 60s we needed an undemocratic, activist judiciary to permit interracial marriage.

In the 70s we needed an undemocratic, activist judiciary to say that women own their own bodies.

These eminently reasonable decisions caused so much popular rage that the Court apparently hoped the rest of us could do same-sex marriage with less help from them than usual, but they still may have to step in.

Fair admissions

When I was growing up, Harvard, Yale, and Princeton all had an affirmative action program, though they didn't call it that. In the interests of diversity (and you could make a case for it), they modified their admissions standards beyond mere academic ability, to make sure that about 95% of their students were goyem, or I believe we're now supposed to call them Gentile-Americans. Now it's non-Asians.

I missed Bisexual Visibility Day, but neither that nor age and incipient cataracts keep me from seeing them. I continue to be amazed at the amount of wasted ingenuity devoted to trying to force the fascinating variety of human sexuality into the Procrustean double bed of homo- and hetero-.

Character Class

They tell me that if I say online that I want POC and LGBTQ to feel comfortable in our space or think that offering to rape is not a reasonable form of discourse, I am a "Social Justice Warrior." It seems obvious to me that I do not have the Warrior nature, so I am glad that someone has suggested other character classifications. I have decided that I am a Social Justice Rogue, although I suppose I could fill in as a Social Justice Cleric or Social Justice Bard.

Front

In the 1950s we were supposed to be terrified by the idea that the civil rights movement was a "communist front." Some of us decided that the civil rights movement was a pretty nifty thing anyway no matter who else liked it, and some looked a bit further and noticed that the Communist Party was an old folks' home that probably would have collapsed if the FBI infiltrators had withheld their dues, and the civil rights movement succeeded or at least enabled America's racial situation to make a great leap forward to its present mediocre state.

Now there is a lot of concern about police abuses, and some progressives are warning us that Cop Block and other such sites are libertarian fronts. They have a point. Cop Block plugs libertarian books, and perhaps our best one-man open source police review board, Radley Balko, is an open and notorious libertarian. (I recommend his book, *Rise of the Warrior Cop*, to one and all.)

Which is not terribly surprising. Just as Communists, motivated by a desire to minimize suffering, noticed that segregation was awful, so a group defined by distrust of the State is going to notice that some of the guys given guns and clubs to enforce the law are going to misuse them.

I am a recovering libertarian. I know there is such a thing as economic force, as well as the nasty old State. I know we can't solve the coordination problem and

the tragedy of the commons without a State. But I also remember the good parts of libertarianism—the wariness of police power and the distrust of the war on some drugs and the war on some Asians—and I’m willing to make common cause with the “extreme right wing” libertarians about them.

New Republican

The New Republic may be doomed. Someone mourned for it because it brought back “liberal internationalism,” and I thought, “Worst reanimation since Herbert West.”

Going back at least to Woodrow Wilson, there has been an element of liberalism that has given cover to the warmongers by suggesting that it is our duty to get into Asian land wars and otherwise meddle in countries we don’t understand, for their own good, of course. We probably couldn’t have had our Vietnam and Iraq adventures without them. (In 2003 *The New Republic* published an “Idiocy Watch,” pointing with derision at those of us who had prematurely noticed that our visit to Iraq would be a disaster.)

What I didn’t notice, but should have, is how awful *The New Republic* was on race. For instance, they promoted *The Bell Curve*, thus perhaps ensuring that we will never be able to discuss the hereditary component in symbol-using intelligence without both sides playing the race card. Ta-Nehisi Coates has taken the scare story that the new regime wants to turn *The New Republic* into the notorious link factory *BuzzFeed* and made the case that it would be an improvement.

Superior Virtue

In 1937 Bertrand Russell wrote an essay entitled “The Superior Virtue of the Oppressed,” in which he attacked the sentimental assumption of the title, pointing out that while the oppressed are no worse than we are, they are also no better and, given the opportunity, would act as badly we have. Since then, Robert

Heinlein has dramatized the idea (the three-monkey parable in *Stranger in a Strange Land*), and the State of Israel has given us an object lesson. At a more trivial level, the geek culture’s fear of “Fake Geek Girls” strikes me as a marvelous horrible example of learning the wrong lesson from oppression.

The Web is full of cartoonists who should have competent people draw for them, just as Leonard Cohen’s songs should be sung by actual singers (RIP, Joe Cocker), and someone should novelize Frank Herbert.

From the ridiculous to the subprime

A scary word has returned: There are reports of a big market in subprime car loans. We are told not to worry, because it’s not like subprime housing loans. Cars are easier to repossess (there’s a movie about that), and there’s not going to be the wave of “flipping” and reselling that we had with housing loans. I hope they’re right. I also hope that if anyone tries to build complex financial structures on these bad loans, the similarity to the previous disaster will be noticed, and people will not fall for it. But I am cynical enough to imagine a new set of postmodern financial instruments that will get AAA+ ratings because no one looks deeply enough to see what they are based on, and we will once again elect representatives of the primitive Republican tribe, with their quaint animistic belief that the Market can regulate itself, and eventually the mighty and elegant structure built on a foundation of soft shit will fall down, and the Experts and the Very Serious People will have no idea how it could have happened.

If John Cage had been a chef

If you develop a preference for food that tastes good, it is like developing an ego. You begin to refuse inedible food and that way cut yourself off from a good deal of experience.

Jamie Dimon is acting as if the government were treating him like the leader of an international crime ring. Unfortunately, he is mistaken.

News story: A teenage boy kept asking a teenage girl for a date, and she kept declining. Finally, he threatened to bring a gun to their next class together. She notified the authorities; he did what he said he would do; he was apprehended. Some people told her that by turning him down, she had endangered the whole school. Teenage girls are supposed to let the terrorists win.

Signs along the cynic route

Can't say I'm surprised about the CIA report. They tortured people; they didn't get good information from it; they lied about it—that's what happens. I can't help feeling that they got a particularly bad report because they got caught spying on the head of a Congressional committee as if she were an ordinary citizen or something. Reminds me of how Nixon lost the presidency because his gang treated the Democratic Party like a Black group or a peace group.

Wonder

I am not making this up: Harvard professor William Moulton Marston invented the polygraph in 1916. Some years later he dreamed up Wonder Woman comics. I am making this up: He rubbed his hands together like Lex Luthor or Dr. Sivana and chortled, "If they believed the lie-detecting machine, I should have no trouble selling them on the bullet-catching bracelets."

Dr. Marston created the comic because he was a perv, a bottom who believed that submitting to a strong beautiful woman was not only the most fun ever but also an excellent way to run a nation. He may have done the best job of transmuting nonstandard carnal ideation into popular art since that other moonlighting STEM guy Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, and really

his approach was no more ridiculous than Michel Foucault wanting to reduce all intellectual disagreement to battles for power and dominance because that was what got *him* hot. The story is told by Jill Lepore in *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*.

Surprise! Surprise!

In a shockingly unexpected development, banning e-cigarettes has been followed by an increase in the use of real cigarettes. Next they'll tell us that abstinence indoctrination is followed by a higher teen pregnancy rate than actual sex ed!

The more I am forced to notice the built-in obsolescence of meat bodies, the more posthumanist I become.

Lovecraft

We all have ancestors. The United States has Founding Fathers who said really good things about liberty and acted on them but also owned slaves.

In the science fiction tribe, we hark back to Hugo Gernsback, who thought that the hero lecturing to the trophy girl about his inventions and then rescuing her from the mustache-twirling villain was a really great way to teach science.

Our neighbors in fantasy/horror have H.P. Lovecraft. He was, as they say, a hedgehog, rather than a fox. He could scare you, with his vision of a universe in which human beings are trivial and irrelevant. That was it. His prose is like Bob Dylan's voice: It's not good, but sometimes it's just right for what he's doing. (I love "the idiot god Azathoth, an amorphous blight of nethermost confusion that bubbles and blasphemes at the heart of all infinity.")

And like just about everyone else writing pop fiction at the time, he made his non-Anglo characters from the cheapest stereotype materials. Worse yet, he was not doing that because he was supposed to. He really thought that way, expressing such ideas in his letters and

amateur press writings, sometimes quite nastily.

The fantasy/horror community recognized his creative role: When the World Fantasy Awards were established, the chosen physical representation was a bust of Lovecraft, designed by the great Gahan Wilson.

In 2011 the inevitable happened: The Best Novel award went to a representative of the sort of people he loathed: Nnedi Okorafor, for *Who Fears Death*. She was not pleased at receiving a graven image of someone who presumably despised her.

So now we have a controversy. Some have suggested that Lovecraft be replaced by a more suitable writer. I like Bernadette's suggestion that a chimera would be a better symbol than any writer.

This past year the Somali-American writer Sofia Samatar won, and I think she summarized it best:

- a) Nobody's post about winning an award should turn into a post about controversy! Everyone should be able to announce their awards with unadulterated joy! And unless the statue is changed, there will be a lot more posts like this. Can we not?
- b) I don't think the statue should be an image of any person.
- c) I am not telling anybody not to read Lovecraft. I teach Lovecraft! I actually insist that people read him and write about him! For grades! This is not about reading an author but about using that person's image to represent an international award honoring the work of the imagination.

Larkin

Hugo Black was once required by politeness to attend the funeral of a legal colleague he disliked. When a late-arriving colleague asked what had happened thus far, he replied, "The defense opened."

When Philip Larkin died, the prosecution opened. He had been a serious poet who was loved by the masses (perhaps the last to reach that status without musical accompaniment), but his

biographer and the editor of his letters portrayed him as a nasty little man who hated women, Jews, blacks, and just about everyone else.

I was not of course shocked that poetry I love came from someone of deplorable views. I went through it long ago with Ezra Pound, and I even found it somewhat *sporting* to appreciate the work of someone who despised my kind so much. I also expected the pendulum to swing in Larkin's case, and it has.

James Booth has written *Philip Larkin: Life, Art, and Love*, and the defense has made a strong case. Booth argues persuasively that the nasty stuff in the letters to his mates Kingsley Amis and Robert Conquest is *performance*, privately playing with racially and religiously offensive terms as they did the words we didn't used to be able to say on television, no more evidence of real hatred than the ritual closure of all missives with the word *bum* was evidence of anal eroticism. I like to think I would have been able to guess as much even if I hadn't done the same in my own extended adolescence. And of course even the sort of close readers who can find offense in their alphabet soup never managed to cite evidence of the horrible attitudes in the published poetry.

The book is by no means a whitewash. Larkin famously said, "Sexual intercourse began in nineteen sixty-three (which was rather late for me)," and he was right about the second part. He made himself miserable and shared the pain with all the women he was involved with, and Booth tells that story too. We are dealing with a flawed human being, and I need feel neither pride nor shame in loving the verse.

If British poetry had a Larkin award, they would have had the same problem as the World Fantasy Award, except that the bust would be even uglier. (I imagine it would have been done by Ronald Searle or Ralph Steadman.)

Donald E. Westlake is my choice for World's Funniest Crime Novelist. (*Dancing Aztecs* is my favorite, but he did lots of good ones.) Now the University of Chicago Press has published *The Getaway Car*, a selection of his nonfiction, which is also excellent; he was a perceptive critic of the field he wrote in. They left out my favorite Westlake nonfiction, but actually all you need is the opening sentence. *The New York Times* assigned him one of those suck-and-tell memoirs where a political operative explains how his candidates triumphed when they followed his advice and failed when they didn't. The review begins, "Every geek thinks the circus couldn't run without him."

Francis the Talking Pope is probably as good as a person can be when running an organization dedicated to the idea that people (and particularly women) are unexceptional animals who must be slaves to their reproductive nature.

The kayak party

Megumi Igarashi, a Japanese artist, has been arrested for making a kayak that is shaped like her genitals. It is particularly explicit, but I am not sure how one would go about making a kayak that is not shaped like female genitals.

NOT FORGOTTEN

Joanne Bosky, beloved sister of Bernadette and Anita, beloved human companion of Nigel and Quinn, finally succumbed to the series of ailments that assailed her for thirty years. I will miss her.

Stu Shiffman's delightful illos brightened many a fanzine.

Vijay Bowen was a fannish friend for many years.

Joan Rivers was a trail blazer, and like Jackie Robinson, she shouldn't have had to do it and she paid a price. She was

allowed to be a Female Comic, but she had to follow the rules: She couldn't be Too Pretty, but she couldn't simply be unattractive; she had to try and fail—the makeup, the hair color, the diets, eventually the disastrous plastic surgery—and she had to mock herself for failing. She also had to police the other women and not let them get away with having too much food or sex. It was a bad deal, and she could have handled it worse, and she really did open things up. Today's female comics and their audiences should be grateful.

Leelah Alcorn was hounded to death because her parents and other authority figures insisted that she was a boy. May she be the last such, or close to it.

Margot Adler studied the Pagans and went native, to good result.

Marion Barry was not the Worst Crack-head Mayor Evar.

After the strange and fascinating *Jesus Christs*, **A.J. Langguth** moved over to writing history and was good at that too.

And Also

Lauren Bacall, Herman Badillo, Warren G. Bennis, Rob Bironas, Benjamin Bradlee, Nathaniel Branden, Jack Bruce, Judie Cilcain, Joe Cocker, Alvin Dark, George Hamilton IV, Wally Hergesheimer, Doc Hinton, P.D. James, Graham Joyce, Maxine Kumin, Jerry Lumpe, Kirby McCauley, Robert Newhouse, Mike Nichols, Don Pardo, Luise Rainer, Mandy Rice-Davies, Robert Sherrill, Shotgun Shuba, George Slusser, Mary Stewart, Patrick Suppes, Shirley Temple, Ernie Vandeweghe, Eli Wallach, Robin Williams

Excelsior,

Arthur