

## *Nice Distinctions 28*

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Like so many of the stories I grew up with, "everyone retires at 65" didn't work for me. Now, after eight years more of part-time freelance work, my last assignment has run out and I am done. For all that time, mine has been the tertiary income for the household, so the financial worries are minimal. I now have no excuse for not writing more. I also have a new computer and Puff, the magick Dragon speech recognition software.

**The fundamental question** of politics is, Which is scarier, the government or the people? (For one thing, governments are made of people.) Gun control is an obvious example. Everyone armed, or just the cops and crooks: Choose your poison.

One supposed answer is to turn it all over to God, assuming we can decide which one. Choosing the elderly Caucasian gaseous vertebrate many worship has been fairly disastrous, and the Dialectic and the Market have likewise failed.

Another possible deity was the Computer. Much sf has been devoted to this possibility, from Asimovian robots programmed to love us to the fear that computers will have goals of their own and turn us into gray goo.

Charles Stross says that there are vast unsympathetic intelligences even now gaining more and more power and grinding us up in campaigns and conflicts utterly opaque to us. They are known as corporations. I find that alarmingly plausible.

Perhaps there are people who share that analysis and have decided that gray goo may not be all that bad, and so they have begun a crash program to bring computers to full sentience by giving them ever more complex Turing tests. They dare not admit openly what they are doing, so they have disguised it as a form of service to the god Security. They call it Captchas.

I first encountered **Wayne Allyn Root** in the pro football magazines, where he was offering his services as an investment advisor. Now he has moved on to defending America against same-sex marriage, which threatens to infect the rest of us with the diabolical notion that marriage can be something other than a solemn duty. Amanda Marcotte pointed out that his marriage statistics don't work. If he applied those arithmetical skills to beating the spread, it's no wonder he needed a new gig.

News story: “There is an **Honor Code** at **Liberty University**, and while it’s not always enforced, if you support a candidate who is pro-choice or pro-gay marriage, you can be punished by the University, up to and including expulsion from the school.” Consider what the words *honor* and *liberty* mean in that sentence.

### **Rant**

A gang of people who think women should be baby machines made a criminally dishonest movie pretending that Planned Parenthood is in the business of selling baby parts. Business failure Carly Fiorina found it insufficiently horrific and made up some worse stuff. The Republican faction that chased John Boehner out for being too reasonable is taking it from there to conclude that the government paying for abortions (which it isn’t doing but should be) is every bit as good a reason to bring the government to an ass-grinding halt as Obamacare or Newt Gingrich not getting a good seat on Air Force One, which they may be right about. I hate living in a satirical dystopia.

### **Folk wisdom revisited**

As words and concepts change, sayings should change:

1. “A good baseball player fails two thirds of the time.”

Baseball geeks now look at On Base Average, rather than Batting Average, so a good player fails about half the time.

2. “God doesn’t make junk.”

By contemporary meanings, God made junk for all of us, but some got the wrong kind and have to have it changed.

### **Throwup Throwback**

The Past is a foreign country, and it sometimes sends us the wretched refuse of its teeming shores. Arizona (unsurprisingly) has a Loyalty Oath. That excellent writer James Sallis told them to place it where the sun don’t shine.

There are many kinds of **mental illness**; some make you shoot people, but most don’t. In that it resembles religion.

The turn away from **Paul Ryan** as insufficiently reactionary suggests that his party is approaching the stage of “Citizen Robespierre is not radical enough. Off with his head!” A contemporary Marquis de Sade might say, “Yet another effort, Republicans, if you would become Frenchmen.”

### **Déjà vu**

Now that Trudeau won in Canada, Clinton beats Bush because the Crazy Rich Guy siphons off a few million Stupid White People votes—no, wait a minute: Jeb! is a big enough disaster for the Republicans to notice, and I’m still rooting for Bernie. (Oh, and congrats, Canada!)

### **It’s a plot**

Fred Thompson’s death is reminding people that he was the one who asked the question that revealed Nixon’s secret tapes. I loved conspiracy theories even before *Illuminatus!*, and that’s one of the two Watergate things I still wonder about:

1. I still suspect that when James McCord botched the break-in, letting the burglars get caught, he was acting as a loyal CIA operative.

2. Thompson's question came from a staffer interview with Alexander Butterfield, which really reads amazingly like this:

Staffer: Blablaba

Butterfield: That comes from the secret taping system.

Staffer: Yes, but blablaba.

Butterfield: OMG, I accidentally revealed the existence of the secret taping system that you're not supposed to know about!

Staffer: Oh! What about the secret taping system?

### **Verbing weirds language**

I was struck by the phrasing in a suggestion that someone should *primary* Positive Wasserman Shultz,\* but I agree with the content; the best I can say about her is that I know of no tangible evidence that she is a Republican mole. And I am reminded of what Barney Frank said of his Republican colleagues: "No, they're not all Michele Bachmann. Half of them are Michele Bachmann. The other half are afraid of losing a primary to Michele Bachmann." Would that the Democrats had to feel that way about Bernie Sanders.

\*If I haven't grown up enough by now not to do funny names, I'm not gonna.

### **Fic**

I must admit that I like Real People Fic. I appreciate Guy Gavriel Kay's argument about respecting the privacy of those who've gone even centuries before, but I wallow in scabrous imaginings about the unlibelable dead. James Ellroy's *American Tabloid* is a particular fave.

A few years ago Thomas Mallon wrote a book with the irresistible title of *Watergate: A Novel*, which it lived

up to. With a few truly fictional characters and some inspired conjectures about nonfictional ones, he told a delightful tale. He even managed to make Pat Nixon interesting.

Now he's back, with *Finale: A Novel of the Reagan Years*, and he's done it again. A fine selection of viewpoint characters, including the deposed Nixon, the promising young journalist Christopher Hitchens, and the First Lady's astrologer (in fulfillment of the prophecy in *Stranger in a Strange Land*), present a fascinating story.

**Speaking of which...** Priya Parmar has given us *Vanessa and Her Sister*, a fictional look at the Bloomsbury group through the eyes of Vanessa Bell, one of the few group members who didn't write. I loved it.

### **Unfriendly Powers**

I never judged a book by its cover. Back in the days when you could buy books in the quaint old mass-market paperback format at actual bookstores, I would go to the science fiction section and look for names and descriptions, recognizing that the publishers had to put certain kinds of pictures on the front to indicate what sort of book it was, but feeling that the words were the important part.

In retrospect, I now realize that I had to look at (or pretty much through) a number of covers that told us the future would be gaunt, misshapen, and just plain ugly. A few years ago I joined the Vintage Paperback mailing list, which sends us a picture of an old book every day, and I realized that the ugly-sci-fi covers were done by a man named Richard Powers (with perhaps a few by artists trying to imitate him).

Once again I am in the minority. He was the Discorporate Artist GoH at World Fantasy Con, where they had a video display of one of his covers after another (from which I learned that he didn't have to draw like that), and now I learn that he has been inducted into the Society of Illustrators Hall of Fame.

**Punk rock** was for the select few who could identify with the working class.

### **Eek! A Mouse!**

Many of us have some sort of vermin we want Orkin to apply extreme measures to. For John C. Wright, it's people who put queer content in children's TV. For me it's the computer mouse.

I've always been dyspraxic. My prep school classmates knew I was smart enough to be one of them but wondered if I could walk and chew gum at the same time. Predictably, age has withered and/or custom staled, and I find myself making more and more mistakes with the allegedly user-friendly MacVermin.

It's an analog device trying to do a digital task. In many ways we live in a world of approximations, but there are some areas where it's a matter of discrete digits, such as the Pythagorean number mysticism Dmitri Mendeleev called the Periodic Table of the Elements. A list of sites or Word files is similarly discrete, and I'd make fewer mistakes if the mouse clicked from one to the next.

**Spoilers** are one of those great emotional issues. Now, a study shows, unsurprisingly, that some people love surprises and suspense, and they hate spoilers, while others (me, for

instance) find story suspense a discomfort no more edifying than excretory urgency, and they like spoilers.

Before I saw the new Star Wars, I read the plot summary on Wikipedia. That, and my soft bigotry of low expectations about visual media, enabled me to enjoy the movie.

### **Religious fear**

A recent article on the history of anti-Catholic feeling in America has reminded me of how hating Muslims can be like hating Jews or hating Catholics.

The Jewish image is obvious: swarthy, hook-nosed, after our money and our women...Trump could probably repurpose some of the old *Der Stürmer* illos.

But not all of those who worry about "Islamofascism" are prone to that sort of stupidity. Some (Eric Raymond, Bruce Bawer, the late Christopher Hitchens) are concerned about a repressive, sex-hating theocracy, which many Muslims favor.

In 1949 there was a best-selling book called *American Freedom and Catholic Power*, by Paul Blanshard. It said that the organized power of the Catholic hierarchy was oppressing us. As Freud put it, the paranoid is never entirely mistaken. At that time, all movies were what would now be G-rated. (There was an effort to ban *The Moon Is Blue* for using the word *virgin*, at least without following it with "Mary.") One could go to jail for selling a book with the F-word in it, let alone pictures of the act it represents. The law reached into our bedrooms (inefficiently of course): In most jurisdictions, even married couples

were forbidden birth control and the use of alternate apertures. (Maybe that was when we needed a Defense of Marriage Act.) The Catholic Church was most responsible for maintaining those rules.

We got over it. We didn't ban Catholic immigration or burn the churches, but we now are far less oppressed. I don't think we're going back. We can let Muslims continue to immigrate, encourage the aspects of Islam that support love and justice (which of course Catholicism also had all along), and never have to have a book about *American Freedom and Muslim Power*.

### **Tabloid switch**

When I was growing up, *The NY Daily News* was a sensationalistic right-wing rag, but *The Post* was notoriously liberal (alleged headline: Snowstorm Hits Negroes, Jews Hardest). Now they're trading places. *The Post* is pure Murdoch, but the *News* is moving left, attacking the NRA and Donald Trump. One headline said BRADY HAS NO BALLS, because the New England quarterback declined to call Trump out on his hate speech. Reversing an earlier theme (Ford to NY), another told Sen. Cruz, DROP DEAD, TED for dissing New York. If we must have trashy tabloids, I can think of far worse targets.

### **Recent Reading**

One of the most useful rules for understanding people is Miller's Rule, which says, "In order to understand what another person is saying, you must assume that it is true, and try to imagine what it could be true of." In *Uniquely Human*, Barry M. Prizant &

Tom Fields-Meyer apply it to people with autism (as R.D. Laing applied it to people with schizophrenia), and get extremely useful results.

John Higgs's *Stranger than We Can Imagine* is subtitled "An alternative history of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century," but it may disappoint the tinfoil-hat set. I enjoyed a number of the deviant possibilities, such as the idea that Marcel Duchamp's "Fountain" (which should have been called an artisanal) may have actually been thought up by a woman, Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven. (I already knew that the fur-covered spoon, cup, and saucer, often attributed to Duchamp, Dali, or Picasso, was actually done by a woman named Meret Oppenheim.)

In *The War on Alcohol*, Lisa McGirr suggests that Prohibition, as well as being a disastrous farce, helped build the overpowering penal and law-enforcement establishment we have now. War is also the health of the state when it's a war on drugs.

### *Not Forgotten*

**Ned Brooks**, stalwart fanzine producer and Southern Fandom Press Alliance member for many many years, was one of the nicest guys in fandom.

We are informed that although he was in his late seventies, he climbed up on his roof to repair it and suffered a fatal fall. A few years ago Max McGee, star of the first Super Bowl, died the same way at a similar age. I am not getting up on any roofs.

There is a tradition in fanzine art, exemplified by Bill Rotsler and Alexis

Gilliland, of minimalist drawing with brilliant captions; I love it. We have now lost one of the great practitioners of it: **D. West**.

Losing **Leonard Nimoy** and **Terry Pratchett** is like moving up a generation.

### **It's over**

Yogi Berra had a proverbially ugly face, and many people contrasted it to the beauty of his soul. He was described as a comic-reading moron until enough people noticed that he was at least as smart as he had to be. He may have been the greatest catcher in baseball history and certainly was a Hall of Famer. He was loved by his family, his teammates, and millions of fans, and when George Steinbrenner treated him shabbily, he turned his back and did not relent until the possessor of one of the most massive, throbbing egos in the world had sufficiently apologized. He lasted ninety years; the good don't always die young.

**Amir Aczel** wrote good pop-sci books.

**Theodore Bikel**, folkie and Trekkie

Death socked it to **Judy Carne**.

**Robert Conquest** liked sf and didn't like communism.

**Leslie Gore**: Let us remember "You Don't Own Me" and not "Judy's Turn to Cry."

**Tanith Lee** wrote a lot of good strange stuff.

**Mack McCormick** was an important folklorist, but I remember him for his LP of "The Unexpurgated Folk Songs of Men."

**Warren Murphy**: Destroyed, the Creator

### **De mortuis, my ass**

**Ahmed Chalabi**, who lied us into the Iraq disaster, has been flushed from the bowl of history.

**Mario Biaggi** was another defender of traditional morality, except for the part about not using the power of the state to steal.

### **And also**

**Joaquin Andujar, Ernie Banks, Julian Bond, Malcolm Boyd, Buddy Buie, Dean Chance, Ornette Coleman, Wes Craven, Darryl Dawkins, Little Jimmy Dickens, Peter Dickinson, Carol Doda, Anita Ekberg, Mel Farr, Frankie Ford, Stan Freberg, Harry Gallatin, Frank Gifford, Alison Gordon, Marques Haynes, Mary Healy, Doug Hoylman, Rod Hundley, Toni Lay, Eddie LeBaron, Meadowlark Lemon, Earl Lloyd, Patrick Macnee, Moses Malone, Frank Malzone, Anthony Mason, Colleen McCullough, Rod KcKuen, Stu Miller, John Forbes Nash, Jethro Pugh, Ruth Rendell, Al Rosen, Billy Joe Royal, Oliver Sacks, Charlie Sanders, Dolph Schayes, Stuart Scott, Carol Severance, Omar Sharif, Percy Sledge, P.F. Sloan, Dean Smith, Ken Stabler, Jerry Tarkanian, Roy Tarpley, Danny Villanueva, Grace Lee Whitney, Dell Williams, John A. Williams, Garo Yepremian**

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Excelsior,

*Arthur*