

Nice Distinctions 29

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To get it out of the way

From here on, this will be a Trump-free issue. The story keeps changing, and I don't want to wait until we know whether he will snap before or after the Republican Party nominates him.

Hello again from Valentine's Castle, where Bernadette Bosky, Kevin J. Maroney, and I continue to thrive. Our big news was traveling to Nashville to attend the wedding of Kevin's sister Terry to Luisa Lopez. Listening to Johnny Cash & Jerry Lee Lewis in my teenage years, I never figured my first visit to Music City would be for a two-woman wedding, but it was. Felicitations and best wishes to the happy couple.

Enantiodromia

Kim Stanley Robinson is the 2016 winner of the Robert A. Heinlein Award, given for "outstanding published works in science fiction and technical writings that inspire the

human exploration of space," although his latest novel, *Aurora*, is probably the most brilliant effort ever to put a final quietus to the dream of escaping Earth. I have not seen a better exemplar of a program turning into its opposite since the organization that began as the National Organization of Nonparents changed to the National Organization for Optional Parenthood and then campaigned to outlaw childfree housing.

My schooling followed the pattern of the Divine Comedy. Elementary school was Inferno, where I was trapped with the slow kids and my psychological issues. Prep school was Purgatorio, where I had to work but gained salvation from it. Swarthmore was Paradiso, but it turned into the Garden from which I was expelled by an angel with the flaming sword of graduation.

Killing the Firebird

I love Scott Alexander's blog *Slate Star Codex*, and one of my favorite bits is his trope of the Goddess of Cancer vs. the Goddess of Everything Else. As evolved human beings, we serve two deities: the one that tells us "KILL CONSUME MULTIPLY CONQUER" and the one that inspires love, co-operation, creativity, and knowledge.

There is another life-form, the corporation, and it may be like us except for the part about the Goddess of Everything Else. For the last 50 years or so, corporations have been carrying out battles of merger and acquisition that are as red in tooth & claw as anything Ev Psych could dream of. Publishing is a current example of this process. Once, publishers had some respect for the

Goddess of Everything Else: The best sellers subsidized work that didn't serve the bottom line as obviously. Now they can't do that anymore, as evidenced by a recent purge at Random Penguin. Evidently, their goddess will turn Her favors to those who do not have that weakness, so they must sacrifice more and more to survive. (Or maybe they are like the Ethnic fox that gnawed off three legs and is still in the trap.)

Rotten Apple

Let me tell you how much I hate Apple: If there were a way for Apple to play against the New England Patriots, I would root for the Patriots. Just as we were about to achieve the dream of computers that would make us more efficient in using words and numbers, "Blow" Jobs and the Lizard of Woz started a process that would turn them into television that also watches us. I have always liked the Zen idea that we are owned by our possessions. More and more devices work to literalize that image; they spy on us, they find new ways to extract money from us, and they control how we can use them.

REALLY

The word *really* can mean "opposed to *falsely*" or "enough" (Do you want to be rich? Do you *really* want to be rich?) Suzette Haden Elgin pointed out that the ambiguity has enabled the word to be weaponized, as in sentences that begin, "If you **REALLY** loved me, you wouldn't...." (Though of course it matters whether the conclusion is "...look at another man" or "...hit me.")

It is beyond reasonable doubt that the way to have fewer abortions is to

give good sex education, to make birth control freely available, and to empower women to say no if they don't want sex and to demand birth control if they do. Since many members of the Religious Right who oppose abortions also oppose those things, some accuse them of not **REALLY** opposing abortion. That's overly tendentious. We should merely point out that anyone who finds that approach unacceptable thinks that there is something more important than minimizing abortion, such as controlling people's, and particularly women's, sex lives.

Prescription opiate addiction is a major problem, and the government is reacting the way governments do, by forbidding and cracking down. A study says that cannabis can seriously reduce the use of opiates by chronic pain sufferers. Is there something more important than minimizing opiate addiction?

Back in the 60s, education radicals said that the school system was merely a matter of teachers telling the kids Revealed Truths and then grading them on how correctly they regurgitated those doctrines on an exam. Oversimplified, of course, but yesterday's satire is today's news, and we now have a perfect example.

Every year there is an NFL draft. Alleged experts tell us who should draft whom, and immediately after the draft they grade the teams. But of course, no one knows anything about how good the teams were at picking players until they have played actual games. After one season, a preliminary evaluation can be made, but it's probably best to wait several years. So the experts are grading the teams on

how correctly they regurgitated what the experts told them.

From Both Sides Now

The forthcoming *Ghostbusters* movie will have an all-woman team; therefore, the trailer for it has gained the most negative reviews in Internet history.

Miller's Law says that in order to understand what another person is saying, you must assume that it is true and figure out what it could be true of. So I'm going to ignore the "eeeuww, girl cooties!!!" part of that reaction and try to talk to the feeling that a precious memory from younger days has been messed with.

I had a similar feeling with the rebooted *Star Trek*. (Remember what *boot* meant in *Animal House*?) I am totally in favor of fanfic, with one exception. If people want to write XXX K/S stories, good for them. But if they have the power to declare their fic official, as J.J. Abrams did with his, then I object. So I practiced the Healing Power of Denial: The Abrams fanfic took place in an *alternate reality*, and we still have the original.

Try it, *Ghostbusters* fans. Just as James M. Cain pointed out that Hollywood could not ruin his books because they remained unchanged on his shelves, you still have the *Ghostbusters* you saw, and you don't have to worry about the alternate ones.

And furthermore: Those who appreciate such things tell me that Abrams's *Trek* was a good sci-fi action adventure for those who didn't know or could ignore the source. Thus it made sense to turn his undeniable talents loose on a franchise that did

not have a long and honored tradition of intellectual and character depth for him to excrete upon. It worked.

Stupid never dies

When I was an adolescent, it was cool to notice that (()) looks like the female genitalia. Apparently, ((())) indicates a neighboring orifice, as one of less *au courant* hate groups is using it (around someone's name) to warn of the Hebrew Menace. There was of course an app for it, but Google has cracked down.

The Past Is an Alien Planet

I was surprised when I saw *The No-Fear Scarlet Letter*, with the original and an "easy-to-understand translation" on facing pages (although it is now half again as old as it was when I read it). That may have been the first indication to me that the literature of the past can be read as a kind of science fiction. Jane Austen's books resemble tales of an alien culture that needs explanation, and of course Jo Walton found the customs detailed in Anthony Trollope's mimetic works so strange that she ascribed them to cannibal dragons, in *Tooth and Claw*. Even Henry James is old enough by now to be fantastic: Daisy Miller must die because she spoke to an Italian outdoors after dark. WTF?

The other day, while **Brexit** was winning, a friend posted a link to a screed about how condescending liberals are. Guilty as charged, your honor. One of my favorite things about being a liberal is that I don't have to consider people my equals to want them treated decently. Everyone should have a living wage and a

single-payer health system, even if they'd much rather be protected from queers marrying each other.

Recent reading

Tidewater slipstream

I fear that John Barth is a literary Nehru jacket: once the darling of Academe, now just another cis het white male. His work could profit from the kind of extensive and intensive study Brian Boyd gave Vladimir Nabokov, but I fear that will not happen. I, however, am loyal to many of the dead fads I once followed (General Semantics, *Games People Play*), and so I reread perhaps his crowning work, *The Tidewater Tales*, and loved it again.

Peter Sagamore and Katherine Sherritt Sagamore sail the rivers and estuaries of Barth's native Maryland (his Yoknapatawpha) whilst awaiting the birth of twins (several hundred sets of paired names are suggested) and interacting with many friends and relatives, including the apparent author of *Sabbatical*, Barth's previous novel, who fills us in on the facts (in this reality) behind the fictions of that second-order one. We also meet versions of four of the Sagamores' predecessors in the ocean of Story: Odysseus, Don Quixote, Scheherazade, and Huckleberry Finn. (The last of these gets rather short shrift, appearing only as a similarly named childhood crony Peter recalls and suspects of latent homosexual tendencies, as Leslie Fiedler suspected the original.)

It is a huge book. If the world is divided on the question of who is in the details, God or the Devil, Barth,

like James Joyce, is on God's side. (I myself am of the Devil's party.) There is more nautical detail than in *Moby Dick*, and I must admit my eyes glazed over from time to time. But there are also many intriguing characters (some literally so), verbal ballets, and swift, sly references. (When we hear of a "Doomsday factor," we are informed that the latter word is used in an archaic sense, as in colonial times a tobacco merchant was called a sotweed factor.) And there is the continuing fascination of his shortest/longest story, "Once upon a time, there was a story that began..." originally to be cut and pasted into a Möbius strip, and his mantra, "The key to the treasure is the treasure." All in all, I had a delightful time.

Let me say a couple of things in Barth's defense. He is thought of as an apolitical aesthete, but much of the book is concerned with the CIA's dirty doings abroad and perhaps on our shores. One plot element taken from consensus reality is the apparent death (I said it was the CIA) of an operative named John Paisley. (Barth later learned that Paisley was a fan of his writing, particularly liking *The Sotweed Factor*.)* Another thing I like about Barth is that he has been multicultural all along, having been seduced at a tender age by *Alf-Laylah-Wa-Laylah* and *Kathasaritsagara*.

Like fellow metafictionist Philip Roth, Barth has decided that he's written enough, and he says farewell in his third nonfiction collection, *Final Fridays*, which I also enjoyed.

*Tom Jackson has reminded me that another of my literary heroes, Robert Anton Wilson, was also a Barth fan, citing precisely this aspect of his work.

The Lady with the Borzoi, by Laura Claridge, tells an all-too-familiar story. Alfred A. Knopf named his publishing company after himself, and other media mostly treated it as a one-man operation, but his wife Blanche did a lot of the work and found most of the authors who made the company so good. Theirs was a lousy marriage but a successful operating partnership, kind of like FDR & Eleanor. This book tells us about it, with guest appearances by their pal H.L. Mencken and other major writers they published.

Henry James (father of the novelist of that name) wrote vast, incomprehensible religious tracts, one of them called *The Secret of Swedenborg*. William Dean Howells read the book and said, "He kept it." So maybe *The Whole Harmonium*, Paul Mariani's bio of Wallace Stevens, should be called *The Secret of Stevens*.

Wallace Stevens was a typical insurance executive of the 20th century: white male, of course; Republican; married with child but happiest boozing it up with the boys; didn't like Jews but liked "Negroes" in their place (and didn't have to see them out of it). He had a fistfight with Ernest Hemingway and came out of it physically and morally worse, which is unusual.

And yet he wrote all those great poems, and after reading Mariani I am no wiser about how the same person did both. Perhaps it was a kind of daemonic possession, and he would wake up the next day, look at his latest work, and say, "Jeez, I musta been drunk."

One of my great Corrupting Influences was Judith Merrill. Every year she'd do a Year's Best anthology on the basis that the sf she liked (which correlated with the sf I liked) was likely not to be labeled "Science Fiction." In the mid-60s, when the field was going through important changes, she reviewed perceptively in *F&SF*. Now Aqueduct Press has done a collection of her writings about the field, which you should buy and read even though it's called *The Merrill Theory of Lit'ry Criticism*.

I have reviewed that and Chris Offutt's *My Father the Pornographer* for *NYRSF*. Mine is the only review of the latter that I've seen that admits to reading and enjoying some of Andy Offutt's smut. (Speaking of pornographers, I am wallowing in *Schadenfreude* over the recent demotion of Ken Starr for his role in the Baylor rape scandal.)

Nasty, Brutish, & Short
Oversimplified history of science fiction: Ballantine became Del Rey.

If you believe the vaccine/autism story, your birth control method might be shooting any storks that fly over your house.

Now that Texas college students are allowed to carry guns to class, teachers are warned to avoid "sensitive topics." Now *that's* a trigger warning.

I am old enough to remember when cars didn't have to be squat and ugly.

The Library of America wants to sell me *The Leatherstocking Tales*. Based on the title, there must be a small but intense demographic that was terribly disappointed by that book.

Once again I am getting Facebook invites from attractive women, or others who own a picture of one.

“Autism Speaks” like Charlie McCarthy speaks.

Not forgotten

The rap on **David Hartwell** was that his taste was too good for the marketplace. Thirty years ago he was publishing all sorts of great stuff at Timescape, but the suits shut it down because it was not making enough money. (According to some reports, enough money to overcome the bath they’d taken on a John Irving book.) He moved over to Tor and continued to give us excellent sf. He created *NYRSF*, a continuing source of valuable sf criticism, which he had already turned over to Kevin Maroney. He was a good friend.

Now released from a world that pissed her off, **Florence King** wrote great funny stuff like *Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady* but eventually became mean, cranky, and prudish.

The Native American historian **Joseph Medicine Crow** completed the four tasks required of a War Chief—leading a successful war party on a raid, capturing an enemy’s weapon, touching an enemy without killing him, and stealing an enemy’s horse—in World War II.

When Jefferson Airplane took off, their lead singer was a woman named **Signe Toly Anderson**. She gave birth after the first album was released and decided that she would rather spend her time being a mommy than a rock & roll star. So the Airplane recruited Grace Slick from a group called the Great Society and found fame & fortune. Signe Toly Anderson died on the same day as **Paul Kantner**.

The best thing **Muhammad Ali** did was to refuse the draft. The second best was to be a Horrible Example.

Today we worry about the collateral damage football does to players’ brains, but when I was growing up, intellectuals were rhapsodizing about what A.J. Liebling called the “sweet science”: the only alleged sport where one wins by inflicting brain damage. (Even hockey has aims other than blunt trauma.) Muhammad Ali gave and got concussions, and we could all see what it had done to him, and boxing has never been the same.

Now They want you to believe **Mark Lane** is dead.

Umberto Eco and **Harper Lee** wrote two of the best first novels ever.

We lost two good guys from sf fandom: **Ed Dravecky** and **Bud Webster**.

Alice Denham was a novelist and a Playmate of the Month. She wrote a delightful tell-all memoir called *Sleeping with Bad Boys*.

Excelsior,

Arthur