

Nice Distinctions 3 I

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Older than me

Amateur press associations (apas) go back to the 19th century or the beginnings of recorded time, depending on how strict your definitions are. Donald A. Wollheim brought the concept to sf fandom in 1937 with the Fantasy Amateur Press Association. They were originally a way for fans to bundle their zines together and save on mailing costs, but shortly thereafter Jack Speer invented the mailing comment, in which members discuss each other's contributions. Most of the big names of fandom and prodom have been FAPA members, and Robert Silverberg is still one.

I joined in 1979 and enjoyed it immensely, but the best part was meeting a recruit from the squamous depths of the Esoteric Order of Dagon, a Lovecraftian apa, one **Bernadette Bosky**, whom I still love and live with.

Like so many other things, apas have been almost destroyed by the Internet, and FAPA is smaller than it used to be; nevertheless, it persists, and this zine will appear in the 80th anniversary mailing, so a shout-out to those of us who remain, particularly OEs Vicki & Steve Ogden.

friendship is magic

Recently, Bernadette discovered *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic*. Having a civilized disdain for gender norms, she declared herself a Bronie, a female one. (Bronies are filly minions.) This led to an excellent synchronicity: It was Bernadette's 60th birthday, and we wanted to visit the Detroit area, where her sister Anita lives, and there was an sf convention, ConFusion, in Detroit that weekend, with a *My Little Pony* theme. So we went.

I did a panel with Sarah Gailey, Hugo nominee and author of *River of Teeth*, a tale based on the delightful premise of hippos in the Mississippi, and one with Mark Oshiro, who has become an Internet presence by letting us watch him Read and Watch and generally Do Stuff. Both were enjoyable.

We threw a party with a *My Little Pony* theme (posters, a cake, etc.) Saturday night, and I got to meet F2F many online friends, such as Marissa Lingen and NYRSF colleague Anne Zanoni. All in all, an excellent con.

The rest of the trip was good, too. We stayed at the Wyndham, but the plants didn't try to eat us.

Epic fakefan

The concept of *fakefan* originated when people who didn't really like to read sf decided that they liked the people who like to read sf and wanted to hang out with them. This year the ICFA, which I have now attended for 35 years, was devoted to Epic Fantasy. I felt like a fakefan.

There were a few problems: I forgot to pack a couple of meds, but Kevin heroically arranged for them to be shipped. The day before I left, my hearing aid company thoughtfully broke the hearing aid for my less dysfunctional ear, and I had to use an old, less good one, so I heard very little. And the airline behaved the way airlines often do. We left six hours late, and one of our bags was

shipped to wherever the plane was going next. The airlines warn us to take everything essential in our carry-ons because they do that frequently. It reminds me of something Dan Jenkins said about a football player with a bad rep: “Rooming with him ain’t so bad if you don’t mind taking a shower with all your money in your hand.” Then they wonder why we passengers crowd the plane with large carry-ons. Anyway, it worked for us. And the conference mainly dealt with Epic Fantasy. Nevertheless, it was good.

These were some of the good parts.

- Bernadette appeared on the program three times: She read some of her poems, then reported on Margaret St. Clair and C.L. Moore as exemplars of women writing horror back in the day, then joined Kevin for a panel on epic fantasy in comics. All excellent, of course.
- Edward James was the Scholar GoH and delivered a typically knowledgeable speech.
- There was a serious paper on Chuck Tingle.
- Andy Duncan, Max Gladstone, Ellen Klages, and Jeffrey Ford did a panel on Humor in the Fantastic. You could tell they knew how to do it even if you hadn’t read them.
- Our invasion of the Library of America continues. There will be more volumes of Ursula K. Le Guin, Gary Wolfe is following up his delightful anthology of the best short sf novels of the 50s with a similar one for the 60s, and Lisa Yaszek is doing an anthology of women’s short sf 1870–1970.
- Amanda Firestone did a nifty paper on Holly Black’s *The Coldest Girl in Coldtown*.
- Like me, Isiah Lavender III thinks that Colson Whitehead’s *The Intuitionist* is what we read speculative fiction for, despite its literary respectability.
- I’m not even going to try to list all the people I enjoyed hanging out with.

Meet the new phone

...pretty much the same as the old phone (which I lost, which is why I got a new one). It’s not a smartphone. (I don’t know what the euphemism is.)

When I was a child, I was the clumsy geek. I could do math (and English), but people wondered if I could walk and chew gum at the same time. I dreamed of the day when computers would enable us clumsy geeks to deal with the world without manual dexterity. But look what happened. I don’t begrudge Kevin Maroney and all the other dexterous people their success (all manipulation is intelligence), but I am disappointed.

(And they should have sicced Orkin on the computer mouse and devised something more suitable for text.)

I don’t want to jinx it, but I think I got an undocumented upgrade. The phone has not once asked me to “Say a Command.”

Four of the great writers of my lifetime—John Barth, Ursula K. Le Guin, Philip Roth, and Robert Silverberg—have stopped writing novels. I’m a bit sad, but it would be ungrateful to be too sad, and I think they had a better idea than John Updike did. After he finished with Rabbit and Bech, his lifetime average decreased with every book.

Just Two Kinds of People in the World

Here’s an interesting distinction: Somewheres vs. Anywheres. Somewheres are loyal to their place of origin; Anywheres have other identifications.

By ancestry I’m what the Alt-Reich would call a rootless cosmopolitan, and when we Jews got our own Somewhere, it didn’t matter much to me, though I’m glad it’s there for them as wants it. Forty years ago, I joined the Anywhere tribe known as Fandom, and since then I’ve had neighbors all over the world.

Rooted is what vegetables are; *grounded* is what gets you killed when lightning strikes. I'm an Anywhere.

Grade inflation in the private sector

I learned a long time ago that when a business asks me to evaluate something they did for me, anything below "Super Duper Excellent Wow" means I was dissatisfied and perhaps they should call me to find out in detail what I didn't like. One reason I stopped filling those things out is that I guessed they were looking for someone to punish.

The M word

Elitism has come to mean "rule by rich people who went to Ivy League schools." Now, *meritocracy* is coming to mean "rule by rich people who went to Ivy League schools." Wouldn't it be nice to have a word for "having things done by people who are good at them"?

The team's execution

I guess the death penalty is so bad that even keeping someone like Charlie Manson alive for 50 years at public expense is preferable. The latest is the Arkansas chemical farce, in which it turns out that the state refuses to do DNA tests that might exonerate two of the people it is eager to kill.

I never had strong feelings about the death penalty. (I was raised collectivist, so killing one person for the general good seemed more reasonable to me than it does to some.) I never thought it was terribly important to make sure that the individual was smart enough and sane enough to be executed. But if the state is going to kill somebody, the least it can do is take all reasonable means to make sure that they have the actual perp. This is nowhere near the first time that the collective lust to kill has overcome such technicalities. At best the death penalty is one of those nice things we can't have because people are turds.

We are hearing the radical new suggestion (something Kamala Harris and Rand Paul can agree on) that a large percentage of those charged with crimes could actually be released on their promise to return (and the threat of additional charges if they fail to) with a record of success comparable to those on bail and that family and other ties can be used to determine who qualifies. 50 years ago there were programs that did just that. (I participated in one of them, as a VISTA Volunteer.) They worked.

When it changed

40 years ago a film buff took all he could remember of *Flash Gordon*, *Seven Samurai*, World War II movies (both sides), and the Masterplots guide to *The Hero with 1000 Faces*, and made a movie with lotsa battles, unprecedented special effects, and magnificent scenery that the actors sometimes blocked our view of. That's when sf became sci-fi.

It was also the year that Terry Brooks cut some of the most interesting parts out of *The Lord of the Rings* and created not only a bestseller but also a template for the infinite replication of fantasy product. *Anus mirabilis*, or something.

And yet 40 years ago is also when I performed the subjectively heroic act of printing up and sending out my very first zine. It worked. Most of the good things in my life now come from that and, as you can see, I am still doing it. That sci-fi movie, a few months later, marked major changes in my life: I went to a movie (!) with a friend (!!) with whom I then copulated (!!!).

Mongrel

I've been passing all my life. I'm about half Jewish and a quarter Slavic, but the rest is Hungarian, which is to say descended from the (Asian) Huns. Fortunately for me, that didn't count, and I was officially, hegemonically White. Now

it has been theorized that Ashkenazi Jews are not White either.

If humanity survives and looks back at us, the great fantasy of “race” will look even stupider than big-time “amateur” sports and punishing the poor by making them have more children. It was even worse 60 years ago. Not only was the treatment of Black people was significantly crueller than now, but we also had a totally unwarranted certainty that we could always tell which race was which. Those who wanted to could tickle themselves with fantasies of (in President Eisenhower’s charmingly Freudian phrase) “a big, overgrown Negro” menacing a nice blonde lady like Carol Channing.

There is no such thing as race, and people are punished for being the wrong one.

50+ years ago, I fell in love with Isaac Asimov’s *Foundation* (the series in general, and particularly the novel of that name). It told of a world where those with the political virtues—strongest, meanest, pushiest, loudest, most persistent, most numerous, richest, etc.—got their asses handed to them by the side with the best map of the situation. That is how the world should be.

And for all that time I have been arguing with many people’s favorite quote from it: “*Violence is the last refuge of the incompetent.*” It isn’t. Violence is more likely to be the first refuge of the incompetent. The competent follow the Teachings of Don Vito: Always try to reason with them first.

Open-source diplomacy

Old dirty joke: “I followed the two of them to the hotel and peeped into the room they checked into. They took off all their clothes, but then they turned the light off.”

“Damn! Still an element of doubt!”

There is no longer an element of doubt that Richard Nixon sabotaged the Paris peace talks in 1968 to improve his own electoral chances. I am not a lawyer and don’t know if that’s technically treason, but I’m with Charlie Pierce: “Is it too late to dig up Richard Nixon and set his moldering corpse on fire on the National Mall, preferably in front of that portion of the Vietnam Memorial in which are carved the names of every American who died there between the years 1969 and 1972?”

Out of time

I fear that if I ever hear a song by Nickelback, I will like it. I have a lamentable inability to recognize the awfulness of things we are supposed to despise, such as Comic Sans and the movie of *Howard the Duck*. And now I am reminded of another form of excessive tolerance I suffer from by the death of Sam Panopulos, inventor of pineapple pizza. I *like* pineapple pizza and refuse to accept the condemnation of its enemies, especially those who put cruciferous and other boring vegetables on theirs. (I perform *praeteritio* upon Japanese pizza with mayonnaise. Never judge a nation by its food.)

Hate vs. hate

The Middle East really brings out the worst in us. The Chicago Dyke March refused to let people march under the traditional symbol of Judaism because it has Zio* cooties, and now Congress (including some people who should know better) is trying to take First Amendment rights away from Israel boycotters.

*If you hate something enough, you don’t have to say the whole word: *Zio, Antifa*

Plausible

Darko Suvin said that sf is “cognitive estrangement.” Robert Anton Wilson said it’s “straight-faced bullshit.” I’m sure there are subtle differences between the

two definitions, but that's not important now; it's the tension between opposites. SF that emphasizes the straight-faced part has traditionally been called "hard" sf, but that term has become entangled in controversy. So how about *plausible science fiction*?

Hate speech

To the adolescent mind (I know because I still have one) there is something diabolically tempting about forbidden words, whether they begin with F or N. So I can sort of understand the kids who lost their Harvard acceptances for playing at being Internet assholes. But irony has always been the last refuge of a scoundrel and Internet culture is making it more of a successful one, so we probably need a deterrent like that.

Nasty. Brutish. & Short

He has the sort of alt. reading comprehension where you get so angry at the first half of a sentence that you don't notice that the second half completely changes it.

A musical version of a Chuck Tingle epic would be a different sort of punk rock.

Current politics make me think about the similarities between Jews & Muslims, but of course if, Allah forbid, I lived in Saudi Arabia, I'd think about the similarities between Jews & Christians.

Conspiracy-rock group: They Might Be Reptiles

Standard statement for corporations faced with bad publicity: It never happened, and we will discipline the people who did it, and we will never do it again until the next time we get caught.

Syphilis wants to keep up with the trends and go viral.

Mental illness can cause people to kill but it can also keep them from killing, and it's

most likely to have no effect. In that regard it's like religion.

The only advantage to facing reality is that turning your back on it isn't safe.

Not forgotten

Huston Smith is famous for writing *The World's Religions*, but he was more important to me for books such as *Forgotten Truth*, *Beyond the Postmodern Mind*, and *Why Religion Matters*, supporting the view that we are spiritual beings having physical experiences, rather than the other way around. I still don't believe in a personal God, but I hypothesize that there is Something Beyond, and Huston Smith pointed likely directions.

Raymond Smullyan dealt brilliantly with similar questions in books such as *This Book Needs No Title* and *Who Knows?*, as well being famous for logic puzzles.

Robert Nozick made libertarianism serious and academically respectable. Now we've lost the guy who made it funny. In 1971 **Jerome Tuccille** wrote *It Usually Begins with Ayn Rand*, which he described as a "libertarian odyssey." For my money, it is still the best, or at least funniest, book on the movement, though I admit he sometimes transcended mere fact.

He stopped calling himself a libertarian after an effort to run for office (governor of NY) on the Libertarian ticket that ended about as well as such things usually do. He rerattted to conservatism, working as a stockbroker and writing bios of malefactors of great wealth. He never lost his distrust of the State, though. When America began its Great Adventure in Iraq, I saw that he'd written about it at lewrockwell.com and looked it up with some trepidation. I was cheered to see that it boiled down to "What does this asshole think he's doing?" He wrote many

books on many topics, though for me he never recaptured the greatness of *It Usually Begins with Ayn Rand*.

Nat Hentoff was a great jazz critic and fighter for the First Amendment, but not being capable of getting pregnant, I will not argue with anyone for whom his deranged fetus-fan views outweigh all of that.

Jimmy Breslin. I didn't like him all the time, but he had the heart and he had the words, and when they worked together, he was great.

George Weinberg shook things up in the 70s by writing a book whose title seemed to many to be a contradiction in terms: *Society and the Healthy Homosexual*.

Chuck Berry: Promised Land or No Particular Place to Go?

Frank Deford was a genre guy: a great sportswriter who knew that even being the best one would be treated like being *The World's Tallest Midget*.

If you see **George Romero**, aim for the head.

Before there was rap, there were **toasts**, obscene recitations improvised by African-Americans. (Two famous ones are "The Signifyin' Monkey" and "Shine on the Titanic.") Folklorist **Roger D. Abrahams**, who died recently, collected them in a delightful book called *Deep Down in the Jungle*. I learned from his obit that the dissertation on which he based the book led the University of Pennsylvania to create a Department of Folklore because (real quote), "We cannot have a dissertation with such foul language in the English department. If you want to approve it, go and have your own department."

Some members of my tribe

Michael Levy was a major contributor to the academic study of sf and a good friend. He was a regular at the International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts (when he wasn't there this year, we knew something was wrong), and he wrote lotsa reviews (for NYRSP, among others). One of his final contributions was *Children's Fantasy Literature*, a historical study written with Farah Mendlesohn, which I recommend wholeheartedly to anyone interested in the topic.

Jordin Kare, an actual rocket scientist, also wrote excellent films.

John Jones renamed himself **John Dalmas**, apparently after a Raymond Chandler character. In 1986 *Fantasy Review*, for which I briefly reviewed, sent me his *The Reality Matrix*, which turned out to be the kind of PhilDickian weirdness the title promised, and I liked it. He followed it with an even stranger one called *The Playmasters*. A recovering Scientologist, he included a character who created a great religion and then messed it up, with a statement that every religion has one of those. He then went back to MilSF, and I lost track of him.

William F. Touponce wrote the Twayne book on Isaac Asimov, focusing on Asimov's talent for multiple conspiratorial explanations for story events, which is one of my favorite things about him.

Like a Bridge Bid

I did it! I didn't mention the sumbitch once.

Hoping you are the same,