

## *Nice Distinctions 32*

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Hello again from beautiful Valentine's Castle. **Bernadette Bosky** continues to help ambitious Koreans get into the college of their choice; **Kevin Maroney** continues to keep a large company safe from its computers; I remain retired.

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One of the absolute, eternal differences between the sexes I was told about when I was young is that women care about their appearance and thus devote a lot of time to it and men do not. Then I noticed that most men (more than today) ran sharp metal along their faces every day in order to look correct. I guess that's one area where I have more of a proper sexual identity than most because I stopped almost as soon as I could get away with doing so.

### *Hef vs. Douche*

*New York Times* Designated Wowser Ross Douthat begins his dance on Hugh Hefner's grave by accusing Hef of pornography leading to masturbation. Perhaps frustrated that people won't therefore hold Hefner thereby responsible for untold millions of cases of blindness

and insanity, Douthat goes on to pile on more charges, a few of which stick.

Hefner came to prominence in Ross Douthat's kind of world. Sex was a giant squid, far too scary to talk or think clearly about. Birth control and alternatives to PIV sex were illegal (though almost everyone got away with them). Abortion was illegal and particularly shameful. One could also go to jail for saying forbidden words onstage or printing pictures that showed pubic hair. The only controversy about gay people was whether they belonged in the jail or the bughouse.

Hefner was one of those who challenged all that, printing his nude pictures along with excellent fiction and nonfiction and editorials questioning the war on some drugs and the war on some Asians. To be sure, he pandered to acquisitiveness and display, and there were tales of sexual harassment at the Mansion, and his last years were horrible for his harem and probably not all that much fun for him.

But I'm happy to live in the world Hef helped make. For instance, Ross Douthat proudly states that when a pill-taking woman threatened his precious maidenhood, he ran off in terror (perhaps with a hand protectively cupped over his boy bits). When people say things like that now, we can laugh in their faces.

### *Good idea*

Those who fully advocate decriminalizing sex work do so because they believe that granting sex workers the support, labor rights, and legal protections of any other type of employment is the best way to help them stay safe.

### *It's a ride*

One book that hugely influenced me was C.S. Lewis's *An Experiment in Criticism*. Lewis suggested that rather than trying to find greatness or mediocrity in *The Work Itself*, we look at the ways people read and enjoy books, finding that the best

ones satisfy many reading desires but we should not despise those that give pleasure in a more limited range (though he could not quite avoid a certain amount of Oxbridge condescension). That led me to a kind of literary YKIOK, in which all successful books (best sellers, academically respected Hy Lit, cult faves) do at least one thing well, whether it's the human heart in conflict with itself or the vaulting imagination of great sf or exquisite descriptions of blowjobs. I no longer had to worry that *The Great Gatsby* was some sort of monstrous fraud perpetrated upon Literature but could let others enjoy the green light at the end of the dock and all that other brilliant imagery while I did not have to care what happened to those rich turds.

At a Worldcon there was a discussion of sf and romance, and Catherine Asaro, who has written both (sometimes at the same time), said that sf is like jazz: The audience wants to see what you'll do. Romance, on the other hand, is like ballet: The audience knows what you'll do and wants to see how well you'll do it.

I would suggest seeing the difference as one of reading approaches, rather than category. Certainly there are sf books one reads with a reasonably strong expectation of the plot but curiosity about how well or poorly they conduct the journey. Brad Torgersen called them Nutty Nuggets books.

In a discussion of a Nutty Nuggets book one might praise a particularly clever trick of plotting while saying that extreme deviation (e.g., the Bad Guys win) is simply a failure to follow the rules, like a 15-line sonnet, and we can argue over which a particular bit is. Brad Torgersen considered a Meredith Lackey book a deal breaker because it attracted our sympathy to the central character and then revealed that he was gay. Some of us would consider that an acceptable variant of the Old Juan Rico Trick in *Starship Troopers*.

OK, let's turn this upside down and look at it from Both Sides Now. Vladimir Nabokov famously said that a good novel should be read twice: once to purge the need to find out how it comes out and once to appreciate its excellences. A Nutty Nuggets book is one for which the first trip is sufficient, but some of us find the first trip an annoyance and like those and only those books that supply a good second trip.

(I must admit that I am not a fan of the action and suspense that make pop fiction popular. I realize that pop fiction, like alcohol and buggery, gets so much moralistic criticism that those who indulge wonder if anyone refrains out of pure hedonism, but yes, I do.

(That is an unusual approach in sf fandom, but I never felt like the Lone Ranger about it because one of my first influences, Damon Knight, felt the same.)

There are similarities between pop fiction and the game experience. I am incompetent to discuss it, but I am told that there is a division of gamers into Narrativists, Simulationists, and Gamists, where Narrativist play is about building a Good Story, Simulationist is about exploration and consistency, and Gamist is about challenge and player skill.

**It has been said** that when Milo Yiannopoulos sings "My Favorite Things," he starts with white supremacy and Black dick. Now he is telling us that he has married a Black man whose face we are not permitted to see. That has stirred up a lot of anger all around, which may be something he loves even more than the two things I just mentioned.

One reply included, "It is much easier to disregard working on the most intimate display of one's politics—love—when the narrative is that love can't be helped." This happened to be aimed at Milo's husband, but the only way you can tell it's not aimed at Milo for being a "race traitor" is that it has too many big words in it.

This is why I hate politics: its claim to be at the center of everything we do. Love should drive politics: Ideally, we engage in the forms of collective force that we dignify with the P-word out of love for all human beings and desire to minimize their suffering. Doing it the other way around leads to—and is—totalitarianism.

### *Pounded & Expounded*

In my more self-critical moments I have accused myself of reading Ezra Pound because it seemed *sporting* to follow someone who hated us Jews so much, but there were all those beautiful lines (pull down thy vanity) and sly words of criticism (“Have you ever let a noun out unchaperoned?”), and mostly that marvelous, doomed effort to put everything into a hundred Cantos. Some critics I respect (Hugh Kenner, Robert Anton Wilson) love his poetry; others (Christopher Hitchens, Clive James) do not; and the latest book about him—*The Bughouse*, by David Swift—suggests an explanation. Swift says that bad poetry is hard to write about, and there is much of that in Pound, but the good parts are good enough to keep the critics busy.

As the title suggests, *The Bughouse* deals with Pound’s years in St. Elizabeths Hospital (which is now headquarters for Homeland Security; you can’t make these things up) after World War II.

Pound had made many treasonable statements in the late war, and there was much feeling that he should die for them, as the law suggested. (In France at that time, those who could claim participation in the Resistance were making life miserable for those who could not.) And yet there were those who felt that he was a great poet and, after all, his crimes had been mere speech, of a singularly inefficacious sort. In retrospect, putting him in the bughouse until people had calmed down seems an elegant solution. Swift discusses at length the question of whether Pound was “really” mentally ill, an issue I am enough of a Szaszian to

consider tedious and unsolvable. (Thomas Szasz receives a single dutiful mention in the book.)

More interesting is the discussion of the work he created after he had gotten over the brutal treatment he had received in Italy, and how he functioned as a teacher to the many younger poets who visited him at the asylum. (Robert Lowell dropped in many times, but they never tried to keep him.) If you are interested in Pound, this is a part of the story well worth reading.

### *The New New Math*

I am old enough to remember the New Criticism and the New Math. In fact, I grew up with the New Math, because my father was one of its perpetrators. The Old Math was endless repetitions of such tasks as adding columns of figures. But then the field was invaded by a bunch of weirdos who read Buck Rodgers stuff that told them of a bizarre future where arithmetic could be done better and faster by small, inexpensive machines. (My father was guilty as charged; that’s where I get it from.)

The catch was that while the Old Math could be taught by anybody to anybody, the New Math required the teachers to understand what they were teaching and many didn’t. We would hear that we have to learn arithmetic with bases other than 10 because that’s what computers use. (A similar fate befell reading, where bad teaching of the see-say method told many that English, like Chinese, has no smaller units than the word. My first fannish friend, Adrienne Fein, told me that her elementary school feared that she would never learn to read until someone subjected her to the discredited ancestral phonics method, whereupon she spent the rest of her life reading for fun whenever she had a chance to.)

As the postmodernists say, that was now, and this is then. There is a New New Math, with new ways to teach it badly, and of course the current fantasy that

teaching can be successfully evaluated by objective tests is making it worse.

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### *Typographically correct*

A lot of the mail I read on Eudora looks like comic-strip renditions of George Carlin's Seven Words because they are failing to deal with smart quotes and apostrophes. Nevertheless, the use of these symbols, instead of the old-fashioned symmetrical ones, is mandated by the sort of enforcers we find in the fashion biz. I have even seen a website where the users of straight quote marks are shamed by sign makers, which means that the visual standards for apostrophes and quotes are determined by those who are liable to use the former for plurals and the latter for emphasis.

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### *Nasty, Brutish, & Short*

Give us your thoughts on the decline of literacy using only a GIF.

I ordered two books from Barnes & Noble the other day. Barnes & Noble has already inserted in my Facebook feed ads for both of them. This suggests that their ad targeting has become too precise.

I imagine William Randolph Hearst imagining:

“Even my papers won't be perfect until we can find a way to make the ads jump up in people's faces.”

“A revolutionary brain supplement formulated to give you ultimate brain power. Known in Scientific Terms as a NOOTROPIC or GENIUS PILL” might not work exactly as advertised.

As a way of judging people, categorizing by generation is right up there with race and astrological sign.

These days everything is reminding us of the Nazis. The other day I bought a UniBall pen and thought of Hitler.

He says he can corner the market in Chinese condiments. I fear it's a Ponzu scheme.

If your system of discipline relies on publicly humiliating children, you should not be allowed near a school.

The body produces several chemicals you could go to jail for having a bottle of.

Investment banks use personality tests to weed in the psychopaths.

I've had a lot of good times in friendzones. The secret is, you have to like women.

### *From Silent Tristero's Empire*

*D. Gary Grady* writes

“To me, materialists are people who believe that the human spirit is nothing more than a natural process or product of the body, which I cannot distinguish from saying that it is produced essentially the same way as methane at the other end. Am I missing something?”

Actually, yes. Without going off on a tangent about materialism versus idealism versus dualism and what I remember about it from what little philosophy I studied in college, I think you greatly underestimate the mystery of matter.

Then again, so apparently do some materialist philosophers, and it's probably them you have a disagreement with. Some envision a deterministic Newtonian universe in which every chemical reaction (and hence every thought) is predetermined by initial conditions. Or they allow that quantum mechanics introduces at least some randomness if not free will.

But the fact is that we don't even know what randomness and probability are. Even in pure mathematics they're undefined terms, like “point” in geometry. Both theory and observation suggest that we live in an infinite universe, with every possible

configuration of matter existing somewhere, including many copies of ourselves. There are also reasons to think that there are multiple other universes as a consequence of either inflationary cosmology or quantum time line branching (one of the possible explanations for quantum randomness) or both.

What I'm getting at is that mere matter isn't so "mere" as we're used to thinking of it. Physical reality is seriously weird and mystical, and the deeper we look the weirder and more mystical it gets. If the human spirit is "nothing more" than a natural process or product of the body, that's still likely to be more marvelous and profound than anything you or I can imagine, and it's not clear that dualism or idealism gets us anything more interesting.

\*\*\*Good points.

*Bob Silverberg* writes

I'm no fonder of Nixon than you are, but I can't go along with your notion of digging him up and burning his corpse. We have a tradition in Western civilization about not desecrating graves, and there is little enough left of civilization these days as it is, without sponsoring the retroactive incineration of the dead. After the restoration of Charles II, the Brits dug up the body of Oliver Cromwell and beheaded it, but it was a personal thing: Charles was probably annoyed that Cromwell had had his father Charles I executed. And despite his regicidal history, there is a statue of Cromwell right outside Parliament to this day, and nobody is calling for removing it, not even Her Majesty, who is very dimly and tangentially related to the late King Charles I. If they can condone the killing of the king, and even honor the man who did it, we can surely let Nixon continue to moulder in the grave.

\*\*\*Agreed. I was carried away by Charlie Pierce's rhetoric.

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### *Not Forgotten*

*Brian W. Aldiss*

The International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts has lost a

Permanent Special Guest, and the field as a whole has lost one of its widest-ranging geniuses: universe-spanning imagination (*Galaxies like Grains of Sand*), Joycean psychedelia (*Barefoot in the Head*), beautiful decay (*The Long Afternoon of Earth*), alternatives to humanity (*The Malacia Tapestry*), world building (*Helliconia*), history of the field (*The Trillion Year Spree*), and even a mimetic best seller (*The Hand-Reared Boy*). My idiosyncratic favorite is *The Shape of Further Things*, a meditation on diverse topics written around the time of the moon landing.

(It must be added that Aldiss lived a long time but was fortunate not to make it into the #MeToo era.)

*Ginger Man caught by death*

J. P. Donleavy was a one-hit wonder. *The Ginger Man*, a bawdy picaresque, had to be published by Olympia Press in the 50s, then in America with the naughty bits excised a few years later, and finally unexpurgated in the Sinful Sixties. These days it looks somewhat tame. Later books were less successful.

*The Good Ship Venus*, John de St. Jorre's delightful history of Olympia, reveals that *The Ginger Man* was a chaotic farrago that had to be cut and pasted into shape (when that had to be done literally) by a woman named Muffy (the wife of translator Austryn Wainhouse).

*Bernie Casey*

Late in the 1967 season the LA Rams were 4 points behind with less than 30 seconds to go in a game they had to win. They blocked a punt and recovered it at the other team's 5-yard line. Everybody knew they were going to throw it to their big gun, Bernie Casey. They did, and he caught it and scored.

He played only one more season, then did a book of his poems & paintings and went to Hollywood, where he acted in a number of successful films, including playing the Black frat leader in *Revenge*

of the Nerds. He was also in my favorite granfalloon, *Star Trek*, playing the Maquis leader Cal Hudson in *Deep Space Nine*.

Also: In 1968 Joe Namath shocked the football world\* by growing a mustache. Casey & Jim Marshall had been wearing them all along, but they didn't count, perhaps due to lack of contrast.

\*Shocking the football world has never required extreme measures. See Kaepernick, Colin.

**Kit Reed** has been publishing excellent novels and short stories (sf, mimetic, and, as she would say, transgenre) for almost 60 years. We enjoyed her company at many ICFA's and Readercons.

**Fats Domino** was both great and lovable.

I think of **Jeremy Stone** as sort of a cousin. When my father was fired by the New York City school system for having Constitutional rights, his father (I.F. Stone) wrote a brilliant defense. Jeremy was a mathematician who also worked for peace.

**Arnold K. Griffith** was a good friend at Swarthmore who went on to do important things in AI and digital imaging.

**Tzvetan Todorov** spoke Structuralism like a native but had some interesting ideas, one of which we named a conference after.

**William Gass** wrote a couple of huge and fascinating novels—*Omensetter's Luck* and *The Tunnel*—and much philosophy and litcrit.

In 1951 **Jim Piersall** cracked under the strain of his rookie year in Major League Baseball and had to be institutionalized. He returned and told his story in a book called *Fear Strikes Out*, which was made into a successful movie with Tony Perkins.

**Lillian Ross** wrote a fascinating peek into that great big wonderful dysfunctional family known as *The New Yorker*. (She did a deliberate, if figurative, Good Grief, It's Daddy)

Fandom is undergoing another Year of the Jackpot: **Randy Byers, Gregg Calkins, Dian Crayne, Dwain Kaiser, Sarah Prince, D. Potter, Baron Dave Romm, Roger Schlobin, Milt Stevens**

The steward & sheriff join in mourning **Shelley Berman**.

**Harry Dean Stanton**: the life of a Repo Man (or an apostle) was intense.

**Jake LaMotta** lasted remarkably long, for a boxer

**Don Rickles** received the final insult from Death.

**Lotfi Zadeh**: Fuzzy Wuzzy wuz a logic.

**Stanislav Petrov** saved the world

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I have refrained from discussing the American political situation because *Yeucchhh!* But Oliver Wendell Holmes said, "It is required of a man that he should share the passion and action of his time at peril of being judged not to have lived." (I am the sort who asks what the sentence is on that judgment and whether one can plea-bargain, but that's not important now.)

So lest I be judged:

President Trump is everything we thought he was, plus senile.

Hoping you are not the same,

*Arthur*