

# Nice Distinctions 3

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My other opening sentence is funny.

We continue to survive. Meet the new car, same as the old car. As you may recall from lastish, our Subaru was totaled in an accident. The insurance company was reasonable, and we have an almost identical vehicle, the cost entirely covered by our payment. Bernadette names cars and such. The old Subaru was Adam, so this one is Edmund, named after Edmund West, the protagonist of Stanley G. Weinbaum's *The New Adam*. I continue to enjoy livejournal, where I am **supergee**.

Have I mentioned that we have rats? (On purpose.) The current number is 14—boys upstairs, girls downstairs (one place where sexual segregation is justified). We say that Bernadette is the ratmommy, Kevin is the ratdaddy, and I am the ratuncle. I like that; one of my earlier fannish nicknames is Uncle Arthur, and it always seemed appropriate. I feel that the uncle's role is to amuse, enlighten, and instruct, but not to take responsibility.

One bit of sad news is the death of Kevin's brother, Tim Maroney. Tim was 41 years old and seemingly in good health, but he collapsed and died from an embolism on July 3. I never really got to know Tim. I heard of him as a legendarily combative figure on the net, but we were never quite in the same venues at the same time. I met him a few times and liked him. I will also miss fellow FAPAns John Foyster and Russ Chauvenet.

I support our troops in Iraq. I wish the president did.

Robert Heinlein's long-lost first novel *For Us the Living* has been found and will be published.

I confidently predict that it will be awful. Heinlein set aside the unpublished works he was willing to accept posthumous publication of—*Take Back Your Government* and *Tramp Royal*—and according to Jim Gifford, whose *Robert A. Heinlein: A Reader's Companion* is the major study of Heinlein's manuscripts, he burned his copies of *For Us the Living* in 1986. (It now appears that the source was Leon Stover, who wrote a fawning treatment of "the Admiral" for Twayne, and was to be Heinlein's official biographer until Virginia Heinlein fired him. The book was announced after Ms. Heinlein's decease.) One bad omen is the similarity of its title to that of the early embarrassing work of a writer whose similarity to him is often overestimated. It will have, as they say, Historical Interest—Gifford thinks Heinlein cannibalized it for *Beyond This Horizon*—and I'll probably give it a try when it shows up at the library.

## **Straight Eye for the Queer Guy**

I was a teenager in the 50s, and among the ambient nonsense at the time was the idea that the word "homosexual" defined men who squealed, and pranced, and cared about what people wore. In the next decade, I finally learned that the word was actually defined by what they did with each other's naughty bits (and that it's an adjective, not a noun, but that's another story). Furthermore, many of the people defined by the word not only didn't squeal and prance, but didn't even want to. (They were—*quel* boring—like the rest of us, except for the sex stuff.) This was a great relief.

Our country has gotten more civilized about the whole thing (even legalizing it), and now there are TV shows where men can squeal and prance and get paid for it. And now I wonder: There are heart-rending stories of athletes having to put up with straight teammates' assumptions that they are straight. I wonder if there's a guy on the show who loves clothes and loves gushing about them, but doesn't want anyone to know that he's really attracted to women.

### **The SNAFU Principle**

This is one of the many useful ideas I got from *Illuminatus!* It says that communication is impossible in a power relationship, that if A points a gun at B's head and demands "the truth," what B will say may or may not be true, but is what B thinks will keep A from shooting him. That's overstated, but it is a factor.

The SNAFU Principle is one of the main things that destroyed Enron, which punished people, whether employees or supposedly independent auditors and lawyers, for delivering bad news, so when they came up with ideas like making bad debts vanish by palming them off on organizations made up of their own executives in funny hats, no one dared tell them there was anything wrong.

The government unsurprisingly does the same thing. For some reason, they failed to find the MacGuffins of Mass Destruction in Iraq (could they be in Iran instead?), and Paul Krugman wrote:

The failure to find W.M.D.'s has been described as an "intelligence failure," but this ignores the fact that intense pressure was placed on intelligence agencies to tell the Bush and Blair administrations what they wanted to hear.

This was even before the Yellowcake Incident (does that make you think of urinals, too?), in which the administration revealed the identity of a CIA operative to dissuade her and others like her from casting doubt on the official truths. As Sam Goldwyn is alleged to have said, "I want you to tell me the truth, even if it costs you your job."

### **Obvious to the meanest intellect**

A theory is hopeless when it cannot be accepted even by those intellectual Little Mikies who seem willing to swallow anything. Thus, Erich von Daniken, unbelievably even by

Colin Wilson, or the theory that Vince Foster was murdered, rejected even by Ken Starr. Now David Horowitz has stated that Ann Coulter's *Treason* is extreme.

### **After the Blackout**

I don't have a laptop, so I wasn't even able to write, let alone contact the net. The phrase is "net withdrawal," but that's not what it felt like. It was more like missing a couple of parts. I learned a long time ago that the entire material world (including individual bodies) is connected. That's not a mystical statement. Our bodies suck in oxygen and emit carbon dioxide in a continuing interchange with the world outside. As bodies, we are tubes that turn food into feces, changing the world as we are changed by it. Furthermore, it has been pointed out that we have *extensions*—eyeglasses, hearing aids, canes—and from a systems view these are as much part of the body as of the world. So my computer is part of me. It's not as desperately needed a part as the (narrowly defined) body, but it is an important part: It stores much of my memory and is essential to the writing process. Furthermore, it extends my nervous system outside the body to relate to people I've never met and places I've never seen. Like Robert Anton Wilson, I take censorship personally: Somebody is trying to cut off *my* information, which is not unlike cutting off *my* oxygen.

The blackout did not inspire me to join the Church of St. Lud. OK, so we temporarily slid back a few decades, but we didn't regress anywhere near the animalistic stew of physical violence and physical labor that was all of humanity's lot until fairly recently. George Bernard Shaw said that all progress comes from unreasonable people who refuse to settle for what reasonable people say is *Enough*. Fifty years of reading sf has taught me to be unreasonable. (Actually, there is always incremental progress, which is made slowly by reasonable people. I myself tend to think of the incremental as excremental, but I realize that we need that kind too.)

I plan my procrastination in advance, or I'd never get around to not getting around to it.

### **Ambiguous Mother's Day card**

You're a special mother  
Even though I'm not a special child.

*The Future of Ideas*, by Lawrence Lessig, is a well-written, clearly thought-out look at the problems of intellectual property, and I recommend it to one and all, despite what I am about to say:

There are many notes in the book, most of them containing text as well as references. These are presented as endnotes, rather than footnotes. There is argument in publishing about this question, and most nonacademic publishers feel that endnotes are the way to go. What there should be no argument about is that the notes should be easy to refer to, and these aren't. The reader has to remember or figure out what chapter it is, and then look in the text of the notes section for the indication of the chapter number.

This is a solved problem. It is trivial to generate running heads that tell you what chapter you're in, and, in the notes section, what chapter or what range of text pages are referred to on that notes page. I'm one level of tech below them (Word, but no publishing program) and I can do it. (Note that I have added running feet to thisish.) The running heads in the main text of this book repeat that it is *The Future of Ideas*, by Lawrence Lessig, in case you have forgotten, and those for the Notes section say, "Notes."

There are far worse problems and evils in the world, of course, but sometimes one looks around, as Casey Stengel did when he was managing the Mets, and asks, "Can't anybody here play this game?"

#### **William Carlos Williams on High-Budget Science Fiction Movies**

No ideas

But in special effects.

I'm pretty sure that I don't have autism, and it's extremely likely that I don't have Asperger's. I think I may be on the so-called Autistic Spectrum, having diagnosed myself with Cartesian Syndrome (the insistent belief that I am a mind trapped in a body) and having a long history of not working and playing well with others, not being able to generate or appreciate small talk, beginning the two best Relationships of my life on the printed page, etc. ISNT, the Institute for the Study of the Neurologically Typical, is an organization devoting to turning the light of condescending study the other way.

Here I suggest an addition to the theory of neurotypicality:

#### **NEUROTYPICAL COMMUNICATIONS DISORDER**

Many neurotypicals have managed to get by without a very clear understanding of words by perceiving tone of voice and body "language." (An extreme example of this is the horse Clever Hans, who gave the impression of being able to do arithmetic when he was actually interpreting these codes). As can be seen from many Internet discussions, this leaves them differently abled for purely verbal communications. (Some try to use complex typographic imitations of the gestures they lean on in face-to-face meetings.) Perhaps we can set up remedial programs.

#### **We All Know Jack Kerouac Sucked, but He Also Wrote Badly**

Jack Kerouac went to the same prep school I did, 15-20 years earlier. When I attended, it had high academic standards and was over 90 percent Jewish. All the Jews met the standards, as did a half dozen or so white and Asian students, and the two or three blacks. Then there were a couple of dumb Catholics, brought in by the football coach to make the team respectable. (Anti-Catholicism was the antisemitism of the Left, and that didn't help, but I've fought that in myself ever since. Every group has a lot of dummies in it, and whatever else you may say about that Vojtyla chap, he is not stupid.)

Kerouac had been one of that last group. He left the school with a hatred for "faggot-Jew-intellectuals." When he said, "faggot," he didn't *really* mean gay people. He himself was openly and fairly cheerfully bisexual. (Gore Vidal probably overstates the importance of his making Kerouac the concave one in their one encounter.) He did mean "Jew." He was a raging Judeopath, even after Hitler had made that sort of thing more unpopular than it had ever been. (A comparison with H.L. Mencken, widely accused of antisemitism for much milder thoughts a generation earlier, is instructive.) When Jack punked out of the Navy, during WWII, his father congratulated him on seeing through "the Jew war," and he himself never stopped thinking that way. (He was also a family tradition alcoholic. Ellis Amburn's bio describes how his parents gave him lots to drink on his sixteenth birthday,



making it clear to him that this was part of putting away childish things.)

It would appear that Kerouac decided that only “faggot-Jew-intellectuals” edited what they wrote. He wished to just spew forth words in the manner of his hero, the psychopath Neal Cassady, and he proclaimed the spiritual benefits of writing that way, which might be valid, but give no reason to assume that the rest of us would get pleasure or instruction from looking in on his therapy.

### The Parts I Left Out

I recently wrote four biographical articles for an encyclopedia. My pro writing is much less interesting than my fan writing: I have to explain everything slowly and clearly, and wiseass is undesirable. Here are the four:

**Senator Howard Cannon** The worst of the lot: boring and corrupt. He peddled his ass to the big gambling interests, as I suppose every Nevada politician must, and he got caught. If he hadn't, he probably wouldn't have been worth an article.

**Hoyt Wilhelm** Baseball player. Threw the knuckleball, a Discordian pitch that doesn't spin, so it builds up air turbulence that moves it randomly. Didn't get to the big leagues until he was almost 30, but he stayed until he was 50. (The physical effort in throwing a knuckleball is minimal.)

**Governor Jimmie Davis.** Musician and politician (Ignace Jan Paderewski whupped his ass at both). Allegedly wrote the beloved song “You Are My Sunshine.” (A Tulane historian has discovered that he actually purchased it, for a nugatory sum.) His first term as governor of Louisiana wasn't bad, but he came back in the midst of the civil rights movement, and while he did not get tossed into a mental institution like his predecessor Earl Long, he allowed himself to be used by the forces of evil.

**Robert Nozick.** The one I wanted to write. The phrase I refrained from using was, “Before him, mentioning libertarianism in a philosophical discussion was as unheard-of as mentioning science fiction in a literary discussion.” (I was also tempted to use the phrase, “Nightfall syndrome,” as his first book, *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, is the only one anyone outside the academy cared about.) He had second thoughts about libertarianism (as have I, to say the least), but

he wiped out a lot of unquestioned political assumptions of academe, such as the labor theory of value, which is Marx's phlogiston.

I turned my articles over to a writing teacher (Bernadette), she improved them, and I sent them in. I decided to leave one amusing bit in the Jimmie Davis essay, a statement by one of his successors, Edwin Edwards, who should know: “He served two terms as governor of Louisiana and was never indicted. That's a genuine achievement.”

## Reading

In 1972 Charles Platt taught a Science Fiction class at the New School in New York City. He warned the students about fandom, which he said was paranoid, elitist, xenophobic, utterly lacking in social skills, but (he conceded) nice to one another and filled with talented word flingers. I immediately decided that I wanted to be one (in a sense I already was one), and unlike W.C. Fields and the woman who drove him to drink, I have thanked him for it.

Platt has been a critic of sf for many years, and while I haven't always agreed with him, I've always found him interesting. *Loose Canon* collects his thoughts on the subject. (Henry Louis Gates had the title first, but that seems a minor flaw.) It begins with tales of his early days with *New Worlds* and Olympia Press, and runs through his recent thoughts on doing what science fiction is about, particularly life extension and cryonics. Some bits (such as an apparently genuine attempt to conduct a channeled interview with the late Robert Heinlein) fall flat, but he has it right about what happened to sf in the age of fantasies, big books, and media franchises. I will quote one sentence: “I dwell on the del Reys because they helped ruin not only their own science-fiction list, but everyone else's.”

Michael Korda, like me, is of Hungarian and Jewish descent, and as with me, one of his favorite jokes is “How do you make a Hungarian omelet? First, you steal two eggs....” His father and uncles, all rascals, were unsurprisingly successful in the Hollywood Dream Factories, and he wrote a delightful memoir of the family, entitled *Charmed Lives*. He also wrote *Male Chauvinism!*, which was somewhat less stupid than might have been expected from a book of that title written by a male in the 70s, and a

couple of crappy books, also with /s in the title, explaining how to be the male with the purplest ass in the office jungle. Thence, to large trashy Showbiz and Rich Pig novels, which appear to have succeeded financially. One of them, *Queenie*, told the allegedly Real Story of his aunt, Merle Oberon.

All this while, he was working as an editor at Simon & Schuster, and a few years ago he wrote a memoir of those days, entitled *Another Life*. I would imagine that his accounts of disagreements with other would-be alpha males at the company are the work of someone who knows how to make a Hungarian omelet, but that's not the important part. What I like is the tales of the writers he worked with, such as Harold Robbins, who started writing one book to get the advance, wrote half of it, and put it aside. When he needed the money, he finished it, but he'd forgotten much of the first part, and so the second part had an inconsistent plot with mostly different characters. Asked what to do about it, he replied, "Leave it." (Korda is too professional to say which, but I believe it was *The Pirate*.) Robbins, by the way, is now writing posthumously, like V.C. Andrews and Lawrence Sanders. Then there's Tennessee Williams, in his lengthy and sodden declining years, attending a tribute banquet in the company of a small, quiet woman of some years. The tributes were long and heartfelt. Then Williams stood up; waited until the crowd had quieted; said, in the most loving tones, "I would like to introduce you to my beloved sister, Rose, who had the first prefrontal lobotomy in the state of Alabama"; and sat down. There are many more.

Paul Krassner, founder of *The Realist*, one of my heroes for a long time, has now published *Magic Mushrooms and Other Highs; From Toad Slime to Ecstasy*, an anthology of essays on psychedelic drugs by Krassner himself and other amusing folks such as Ed Sanders, Terence McKenna, and R.U. Sirius. Much of it amuses, enlightens, and instructs. I cannot do this sort of thing anymore because I got greedy a while back, but I still cheer for those who do so. It's self-published by Krassner, available from paulkrassner.com or for \$20 postpaid from Paul Krassner, 9289 San Simeon Drive, Desert Hot Springs, CA 92240.



There's probably no such thing as "the greatest cartoonist in the world," but for my money Robert Mankoff is all the way up there with the likes of Charles Addams, Gahan Wilson, and B. Kliban. He is often surrealistic and even metaphysical, as in the classic frame breaker "Elementary, the Cartoonist Did It," which became the title of one of his books. His latest is called *The Naked Cartoonist*, and it's a how-to guide as well as a collection of his work. I always thought of him as a bit like Magritte (though his distinctive drawing style is more like Seurat), and he discusses Magritte here, complete with a series of cartoons about Mr. Appleface.

*Nonrequired Reading* (appealing title) is a collection of 2-3-page book reviews by Wislawa Szymborska, the Polish poet who recently won the Nobel Prize. It's a charming, witty, magnanimous book. One particularly amusing review is a gentle chiding of a fellow poet who acts as if their specialty were the only real writing.

*The Man Who Changed How Boys and Toys Were Made* is the curious title of Bruce Watson's short but informative bio of A.C. Gilbert, inventor of the Erector Set, who remained part eager and curious child while becoming an efficient business owner.

Arianna Huffington started with a *Total Woman* book, then there was a grotesque Senate campaign by her then-husband in which she tried to keep her lips from moving during his speeches, and finally she wrote a book about the position of women under President Clinton that deserved the cruelest terms that can be applied to attempted humor: facetious and/or jocular. Now, however, she has undergone a metaphorical heart transplant, and they seem to have thrown in some brains as well. Her latest book, *Pigs at the Trough*, would be heavy-handed satirical sf about the gross excesses of Big Business, except that it's all true. I'd love to see her elected in the pucoming California chaos, but it doesn't seem likely.

Dennis Potter, British author of teleplays and screenplays, is not as well known over here. Perhaps the most remarkable of his works is *The Singing Detective*, a six-part miniseries in which a Private Eye writer named P.E. Marlow

(P for Philip, of course) thinks back on his life and work while lying in a hospital suffering from, and being highly medicated for, an ailment that brings both paralysis and hideous disfigurement. The levels of plot weave in and out and are all resolved together at the end.

Humphrey Carpenter has written *Dennis Potter*, a bio that shows how much of Potter's work was autobiographical. Potter was born in a strangely isolated part of England called the Forest of Dean. At the age of ten, he was fiddled about with by an uncle actually named Ernie, and that left its mark. A few years later, he began to suffer from acute psoriasis, which not only made his skin a mass of painful open sores, but also shriveled and crippled his joints until his hands looked like eagle claws. (Potter believed that his disease is what the Bible called leprosy, and some experts agree. The Biblical disease is definitely not Hansen's disease.) The horse doctor's doses of corticosteroids his condition required accelerated his tendency to mania and depression. Still, he wrote. He usually included at least one author substitute in each work. He was happily married (and it is possible that his wife was, too), but every few years he would write about a character who loved his wife but felt compelled to hire prostitutes and verbally abuse them. A further effect of each character's disease is that he compulsively records the exact number of prostitutes he has hired, which increased from play to play. You can say that Potter fell into an awful situation and proved himself equal to it, but he did produce some great work.

As a sign that I'm sliding into the new millennium, I am going to review the web site of Malcolm Gladwell, author of *The Tipping Point*: <<http://www.gladwell.com>>

There he looks at his own experience as a West Indian to cast light on patterns of racism. There's an article on "physical genius," as represented by Wayne Gretzky and a man who could be called the Wayne Gretzky of neurosurgery. (As a symbol-using geek, I find it hard to admit that *all* manipulation is intelligence, but he's right.) His explanation of why *Iacocca* was a disaster for the exec-autobio business is delicious. He discusses the difference between choking and panic. He knows that one standard question in job interviews really translates to "Describe a

personal strength as if it were a weakness." He understands cooperation and knows that almost no major advances come from lone geniuses, but rather from cooperative teams. He has a look at Enron that concludes:

They were there looking for people who had the talent to think outside the box. It never occurred to them that, if everyone had to think outside the box, maybe it was the box that needed fixing.

The worst thing about *Saying Yes*, by Jacob Sullum, is that we still need it. It is rich in arguments about drugs and drug policy that have been stated since at least the Sixties and never refuted: The similarities between illegal drugs and legal alcohol. The similarities between illegal drugs and prescription medicines (now Paxil and Xanax, instead of Miltown and Dexedrine). The sharply limited harm done by the friendlier drugs, and the way even the dangerous ones do not leap out and devour the user, like a Stephen King monster, after a single use. The way medical marijuana refuses to stop working when Congress orders it to.

There is some material I hadn't seen before, such as the 19th-Century argument that cocaine had to be stamped out because it made the usually docile colored population rise up against its white betters. Here, too, we learn that the Amazing Randi was genuinely shocked to learn that his friend and hero Carl Sagan smoked weed. Randi wouldn't outlaw the stuff, but he thinks it's an evil "surrender to chaos." To use a bit of Freudian imagery, he fears that we could be inundated by the black tide of mud that is occultism if we do not maintain strict, tight control.

Still, it's what Lester Grinspoon and Andrew Weil and Thomas Szasz and so many other reasonable people have told us over and over again. But I do not lose hope. In the Sixties I was not only a Drug Legalization Fanatic, but also an equally extreme Sex Freedom Radical who believed that some day the courts would strike down all laws against private, consensual sex.

Excelsior,

*Arthur*

