

# SPARTACUS

NO. 14

OPINION & BLATHER BY

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APRIL-MAY 2016 \* GHLIII PRESS PUB NO. 1195

The summer of 1996, almost twenty years ago, was an amazing time. I drove from New Orleans to Anaheim for L.A.Con III, the wondrous convention of Julius Schwartz, Buzz Aldrin, Ray Bradbury, and my friend Inge Glass. Afterwards I spent four days renewing family ties with the Kings and Johnsons of Rosamond and Lancaster, California – surprising most of my cousins, who didn't know I was coming. Then I drove to Frontera and the razor-wired, fly-thronged California Women's Prison, where for three hours I sat and talked with Leslie van Houten.

Leslie was an erstwhile member of the Charles Manson family, serving life for a murder that took place in August, 1969. She was 19 when her crime was committed. She was 46 when I spoke with her. She is 66 now, and, after 18 previous hearings, the California State Parole Board has recommended her release.

I wrote up my conversation with van Houten for the fifth issue of *Challenger* and reprinted the article in issue no. 32. The latter is on eFanzines.com and I refer the interested there. Here my embarrassed admission: the woman dazzled me. She was not made up – sweatshirt, old jeans, hands black with hair dye – but she was energetic, responsive, warm, funny, and cute. I was instantly at ease and within minutes was yup-yupping like the dumbest male hick in California. Which, at the moment, I probably was.

We had a great talk, at least from my point of view. We talked about Eddie, the client whose manuscript I'd asked her to review. We talked about our favorite writers – hers was Jim Thompson, the great *noir* mystery writer. We talked about the great events of our youth – JFK's assassination (like every other Boomer, we could both name the guys who told us about it) and the moon landing (she had no memory of it). I told her about People's Park, with my sad and sincere note "I



wish you'd seen it. My God, I wish you'd seen it." And we talked about the Family, and her crime. She was very straightforward about the night in August, 1969 when she condemned herself to this place. I snuck a glance at her forehead to see if the X-shaped cut she and the other Manson girls had carved there during their trial had left a permanent scar, and I think she caught me doing it. When I finally came to the crux of the matter and said, utterly bemused, "Leslie – what the fuck?" she simply couldn't tell me.

She did tell me about her ongoing troubles with the Parole Board, and the standard which they used to evaluate a prisoner's fitness for release. It's a grid system, and even then, 20 years ago, she had already reached the top. With fetching bemusement, Leslie said that the board's shrink expressed doubt that she had "internalized her externals." Actually, of course, the crime was still too fresh in the public mind – twenty-seven years after the fact.

Now, it's *forty-seven* years after the fact. And now the Parole Board has voted to let her go. For Leslie, the salient question is whether Governor Jerry Brown agrees. For me, the salient question is what to think of it. The woman I met – looked like this at the time → and was sexy and delightful. When she looked like the girl on our left down below the woman stabbed an innocent 16 times so she could fit in with her friends.



She has paid for that atrocity with 45 years of her life. The question I went to Leslie to ask – albeit about someone else – remains germane. Is there such a thing as rehabilitation for an inhuman crime? Is it enough to warrant return to society? Is 45 years enough? Before you answer through simple reaction, remember that the law has so adjudged her – after 20 years+ of her being at the top of their grid. The Board is required to give her the benefit of the doubt. Perhaps we should too.

I stopped writing to van Houten shortly after our visit, but for several years I've had an envelope on hand addressed to her. I'm tempted to use it now, but first I have to find a return address. Other people live here, where I regard myself as a guest, and I'm not sure this family, liberal as it is, wants to have such an infamous person know where we live. Nevertheless, I'm tempted to congratulate Leslie on her parole, to wish her well in the life she'll begin – talk shows, seminars, speeches, book contracts; it won't be bad – and try to get across the hope I harbor that she'll live up to society's faith in her. I said at the end of my *Challenger* article, in the best paragraph I've ever written, that a woman deserves faith. Even one with this past?



"Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them." Hebrews 13:3.

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The Northeastern presidential primaries settled almost everything insofar as the 2016 Presidential election is concerned. Donald Trump won all five by crushing margins. In the four out of five states which restricted voting in their Democratic primaries to registered Democrats, Hillary Clinton triumphed by similar margins. The delegate count in each race is so lopsided as to be definitive. For better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, we have our pairing.

Many are unhappy about it. The desperate stunts pulled by Ted Cruz to try to stop Trump have done little more than make him look more ridiculous than he is. Bernie Sanders has grown drunk with the adulation at his monstrous rallies; his race is no longer about his revolution, but about him. His vow to contest the inevitable is an ego war benefitting no one but Donald Trump. The millennial BernieBots supporting the great independent have devolved into vulgarity and bitterness. Before the New York primary, a Sanders surrogate actually called a wife, mother, former First Lady, New York senator and Secretary of State a *whore* at a campaign rally, embarrassing his candidate and bruising his image as a man of principle.

Zealots trying to pin Hillary as a corporate stooge threw dollar bills at her car – proving themselves to be privileged, entitled, arrogant, rich kids on a thoughtless frolic. Bernie’s campaign has been crippled by the triviality and immaturity of his people. For them compromise and politics are irrelevant relics of the political past. They show impatience, ignorance and lack of interest in the past. Hillary would be receptive to their future and their admirable goals. Such tough and tested liberals are their best chance of seeing the brought to fruition. But I don’t get the impression that this matters. Check out the Yahoo news article on April 19, by Harry Bruinius. It’s a righteous analysis of how BernieBots feels. Their intransigence insures their defeat.

Let’s just make sure that it doesn’t insure ours. Rosy and I were watching the documentary series *Race for the White House* recently. I paid special note to the episode on 1948’s race between Harry Truman and Thomas Dewey. Immediately afterwards the set switched to Donald Trump’s “presidential” foreign policy speech. Aside from the obvious lessons of avoiding overconfidence and following one’s instincts – in other words, Dewey’s fatal mistakes – there was a most disturbing similarity: a candidate who came across as crude and blustering – yet connected with the voting public. Trump is no Truman, of course, and when accusing Ted Cruz’ family of involvement in the JFK assassination, both insane and obscene – but he is also dangerous. Very.

For that reason the scenes from California at the end of April and Seattle at the end of May struck me as absolutely insane. Demonstrating against Trump at his rallies is righteous. Violence, however, could not be more stupid. Fighting with Trump supporters, trashing cop cars – these actions do the impossible and make that vile race-baiting, hate-baiting fraud look sympathetic – and perhaps, to the frightened and dumb, necessary. In 2016 we’re seeing ascendant and angry femininity, armed with intelligence, ability and knowledge pitted against a caricature of virility and power, strapped with venom and fear. We say it every time, because it’s true every time, but this time it’s *really* true: this one matters.

“I’m telling ya, this is going to be the death of liberals. this nit-picky, intramural attacking of friends for insufficient purity. Compulsively cleaning up a little corner of the room, that’s already quite clean...while there are giant piles of shit everywhere else.” -- Bill Maher.

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My response to the 2016 Hugo nominations? **Round 2.** Once again, the final listing for science fiction’s most treasured award is dominated by rightist Rabid Puppies. It’s repulsive.

Of course, my perspective on this year’s field is warped by the fact that with the exception of Steve Stiles and Toni Weisskopf, none of my nominations made the final ballot. The competing novels are mostly fantasies, and *Uprooted* is the probable winner; author Naomi Novik’s *His Majesty’s Dragon* would have won several years ago had it not been for the Australian ballot (which allowed *Rainbow’s End* to take the Hugo). Novik is a strong fan favorite and the book is also a Nebula nominee, like fellow contenders *The Fifth Element* and *Ancillary Mercy*. My favorites, *The Water Knife*, *Aurora*, and especially Cixin Liu’s *The Dark Forest* ... all neglected. In the short drama listing, the brilliant *Walking Dead* number “Here’s Not Here” had to cede its place to a *My Little Pony* episode. That’s just ridiculous.

But it is, again, the Puppy influence that’s making the impact on the body fannish. People already pulling their nominations. *Black Gate*, which had been recommended to me by fans I trust as worth a look, withdrew, as did a short story contender. As ever, chaos rules.

The new nominating system promoted as antidote to bloc voting seems ridiculously complex. I would much rather rely on the interest and good taste of fandom at large to insure a wise and truly representative ballot, but, as could be expected, tastes are spread too far and wide to counter the Pups; concerted effort. Perhaps we could add two or three more spaces to the usual five where previous winners/contenders in a particular category could name nominees.

I join with those who hope fandom votes for the worthy contenders and *then* casts its lot with No Award. It’s what I gleaned from George RR Martin’s Not a Blog on the subject and several other opinions I’ve read. So it’s what I’ll do.

# THE LETTERCOL KNOWN AS "LOU"

**Rich Lynch**

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It's not easy to condense one's memories of a dear departed friend into just a few lines of text. Your remembrance of Peggy Ranson does a good job of that. She was one of the fan artists who gave Nicki's and my fanzine *Mimosa* the visual texture that words alone cannot do. She (in collaboration with Teddy Harvia) was a cover artist for three of our issues, including the very last one, and she always answered the call whenever we needed spot illustrations for a specific article or essay. Her "Best Fan Artist" Hugo Award at the 2003 Worldcon, out in San Francisco, was certainly well deserved. I only regret that we didn't live closer to New Orleans so that our paths would have crossed more often than they did. Like you, I am very much missing her.

On Presidential politics: You say that: "Of course I favor Hillary. Sanders rejects even the idea of appealing to the middle." That's probably the main reason that he will not be the choice of the Democratic Party voters. After eight years of a left-leaning Presidency, there is no way we are going to elect someone who is even *left*-leaning. The next President will be somebody who is more conservative than Obama and the only Democrat of significance who fits that description is Hillary Clinton.

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I am regularly astonished at the horrific insanities that are coming out of the mouths of Republican candidates, and it just gets worse. Just about any of their policies would violate international laws and the morals of most intelligent people, yet they make their announcements almost blind to what most people would say about it. They have a lot of support, which says so much about a sizable chunk of the American electorate. I think I can safely say that the rest of the world is fearful about what the electorate will do, and who they will elect. I am sure I have already said all this elsewhere, but it is hard to believe that the Republican Party has attracted so many people with such vile ideas, attitudes and policies. (I must wonder about some Republican voters, who do not like Democrat policies, but are hard-pressed to vote for anyone under the Republican banner. What do they do? Hold their nose, or simply not vote?)

Any time there's a report about Donald Trump's latest horror-show tactics, we've gotten to the point we mute the sound on the TV. Anything he does and says is beyond disgusting, but he's now polished himself up to follow set speeches to make him sound even somewhat presidential. America, fascism creeps in with a smiling face, or in Trump's case, a smug grin.

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Surprise, surprise! The San Bernadino attack has managed to bring up another angle to the privacy vs. surveillance controversy over the unlocking of the shooter's iPhone. It seems simple enough. The phone in question didn't even belong to the shooter. It was an employer-issued phone assigned to him by the very government agency he attacked. Apple, however, refuses to write the code that would unlock the phone. The argument is that if Apple unlocks this phone, the company can be forced to unlock others. The FBI and Apple were headed to court to argue it out, but that seems to be on hold now that a third party has come to the FBI offering to unlock the phone as a public service. I'm not sure I like that option better. It's one thing to have phone-unlocking

technology in the hands of Apple and the FBI. I'm not sure we are better off to have that technology developed by a private hacker.

*I too wish that the issue had gone to court, and been settled as a matter of law: can the government, through court action, require a private company to provide information or assistance regarding its technology in a matter of criminal activity or national security? The question will remain unresolved. Fareed Zakaria skillfully addressed the question in his debate with Edward Snowden: why should encrypted info on an iPhone be immune from court order?*

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Unfortunately, worldwide, countries are making Syrian refugees unwelcome. Detractors of the refugees have not been limited to America. The general attitude is *Not in my country, you don't!* The worst has been Hungary, where the prime minister Viktor Orban claimed that the refugees were just coming to Hungary for the money. The war in Syria went unmentioned. He, along with Macedonia, has barred them from even crossing their borders to get elsewhere. It seems no one likes big influx of people. Especially not with the taint of the label *Arab*.

Of course, while Hank Reinhardt built up the image of being the Wolf Lord, he was actually a pussycat. It's no wonder fellow apans roasted him gently, and had a wonderful time of it.

**Tom Feller**  
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Anita and I saw *Concussion* on pay-per-view. Will Smith was excellent, but overall it was a boring movie.

The Hugo Award finalists have been announced, and I see that you did as well as me in nominating works that made the final list, although one of my nominations "The Deeper Water Bride" by Tamsyn Muir is a Nebula Award nominee. Anita and I watched last year's ceremony from the convention center's bar and, like Rich Lynch, were disturbed by the cheers for "No Award".

Thanks for the memorial to Peggy Ranson. She was a fine lady.

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I'll disagree with you on where Donald Trump's support comes from. Not just the white poor, but the white middle class who see the world changing before their eyes and don't want it to. They believe Trump will get tough and knock down the blacks and Muslims and immigrants so they once again can rule the roost. Sorry, folks, the world is different and it ain't going back.

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As you know, I live in Texas, which means I have witnessed the rising of Ted Cruz, who makes bile rise in my throat. In sort, he disgusts me. A true Christian will try to build bridges, not walls – as somebody in the Vatican noted earlier this year – but Cruz doesn't care about what really needs to be done to help others or this nation. His only concern is what will help himself. He is not, and never has been, a team player, which is only one of the many things the Republican establishment can't stand about him. And don't even get me started on that nutjob businessman who thinks that he's got the answer to everything, even though he knows nothing about diplomacy or domestic and international affairs at all.

I am voting Democratic, no matter who the nominee is. We have no choice but to keep the madmen out of the White House.

Back-tracking to the illustration on the first page, my birthday is March 22nd, so the attack in Belgium definitely was a serious damper on my mood that day. I do not claim to understand the mindset of terrorists, but I can share the thoughts of the international students I teach: in class discussions they clearly state that they do not condone the actions of ISIS, Al Qaeda, Boko Haram, the Taliban, or any other terrorist organization. In fact, their consensus is that educating people as to exactly who, what and why these groups exist, and how they operate, is the best way to counter these groups, hopefully weakening their appeal in the process. The solutions offered by the GOP are not going to stop these groups and their attacks. Sadly, these destructive events will always continue. Conventional warfare no longer works in this world. Welcome to the new World War: a war with no clearly defined national enemy. Events like Brussels, Paris, and 9/11 make me feel as if we are living in a world constructed by Philip K. Dick.

My thoughts on the Supreme Court nominee of President Obama are fairly straightforward: Merrick Garland sounds like he would be a fine Justice. In fact, most members of Congress agree, and that's on both sides of the aisle. The problem is that the GOP establishment is so firmly entrenched in its anti-Obama mindset that they really don't care that major SCOTUS decisions will be locked at 4-4 until well into 2017. My understanding is that if major Supreme Court decisions are not made, then lower court (namely, the Federal Appeals Court level) decisions will stand, and of the 13 Federal Appeals Courts, nine of them are controlled by liberal justices. Translation: the GOP will not win many – if any – cases to enforce their warped vision of reality on America. And like you postulate, if the democrats retain the White House, the next President might just nominate an even more liberal justice. Garland is practically a centrist, so the GOP controlled Senate should just dump their rhetoric, suck it up, go ahead and conduct hearings, then approve Garland. They may not get a better candidate to their liking. All the GOP is doing right now is making itself look like a 21st century version of the German National Socialist Party of the 1920s and 1930s. They truly have taken a full gainer into the stupidity pool. (Insert famous Santayana quote here.)

You know, there are times when I detest the two-party system that the USofA has developed over the years. Sure, there are other parties in existence – the Libertarians, Green Party, American Socialist, and many other tertiary political entities, including independents – but the media exerts its massive control by rarely mentioning any of them. In fact, recently I went online and looked up the 2012 presidential ballot for Texas, counting 13 valid sets of candidates thereon. Not only that, here is an odd tidbit for you and your readers, too: did you know that the Prohibition Party has had a presidential ticket on every election day ballot since 1884? The More You Know... Anyway, I would love to see some of these other parties represented in Congress. My dream composition of Congress would have the House of Representatives at 200 Republicans and Democrats each, then the remaining 35 would be split between independents, Libertarians, Socialists, and Communists: just a handful of each, of course. The Senate's makeup would parallel that with 45 Democrats and Republicans apiece, and the remaining 10 would be a hodgepodge of those aforementioned other parties. Such a congressional demographic would in theory force the US Congress to actually work together. If memory serves, it has actually done so in the past. What a concept.

Considering your legal background, and the fact that you interviewed Leslie Van Houten in 1996 (writing about that in *Challenger*, I remember), I suspect your next *Spartacus* will have some thoughts about her just announced parole approval (pending Governor Brown's signature, though). I find your legal stories fascinating. By all means, regale us with more of these sordid tales.

I never knew Peggy Ransom personally, but over the years her artwork was always some of my favorite. You have my deepest condolences on the loss of your friend.

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One great value of YouTube is enabling people to revisit TV shows half-remembered from childhood. It teaches one a lot about one's adult spirit to re-observe the stories and effects that made one exult or shudder or emote as a *bebe*.

The gem among my memories is a Halloween special involving a scarecrow given human form by a witch and sent to a neighbor's party. His true straw-stuffed self appeared in a mirror and all Hell broke loose. IMDB – another internet treasure – doesn't back me up on this, but I could swear the protagonist, in his non-pumpkin-headed form, was played by a young Dick van Dyke. Anyway, this show hasn't shown up yet, but the terrific *Cheyenne* episode with the burned bear with glowing eyes, various *Playhouse 90s* I admired but didn't understand, innumerable *Twilight Zones* and Jessica Tandy's sad and spooky "The Glass Eye" on *Alfred Hitchcock Presents ...* all have. Each made a tremendous dent in my pre-teen brain.

So did "The Image of Death" on *One Step Beyond*.

*One Step Beyond* was the weird, psychic, supernatural counterpart to *Twilight Zone*, roughly contemporary, less splendid than Rod Serling's masterpiece but occasionally quite effective. I can hear its haunting theme and the silky voice of its narrator, John Newland, even now. Most memorable was this tale about a French aristocrat and his mistress who had murdered his first wife in her sickbed. A stain, appearing on their wall, began to show definition – becoming a skull before the aristo freaked out and covered it with a painting. The mistress/second wife pooh-poohed his conviction that the spirit of the victim was reappearing through the stain – at least until they removed the painting, saw this underneath, at which point the mistress shrieked and dropped dead. The aristocrat confessed, was sentenced to the guillotine – though no one else could see anything on the wall but a nondescript smear of gunk.

When I – aged nine or ten, saw the tormented face, I – in the vernacular – *shat*. Hello, night terrors.



57 years after my one and only viewing of the episode, I found it on YouTube, and watched it again. How relieved were my guffaws at the stilted acting and corny script. Nothing spooky here for all-grown-up GHLIII! And then the big scene came up, and this ← face appeared.

*BLEAH!*

The horror that shot through me like lightning in 1959 returned – unforgotten, undiminished. I had grown up, grown old, been married, divorced, remarried, tear-gassed, shot at, nominated for 14 Hugos, traversed the Pacific four times ... and still that face freaked me out. *YIKES*.

That was several weeks ago. It's taken this long for me to build up my nerve to go back, pause the show at the appropriate moment, and record that terrible moment.

I guess I'm over my boyhood fright now. Just don't pull any paintings off the wall around me. Not yet.

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Years ago my I was introduced to Joy Moreau by fellow fan publishers in Niagara Falls, New York. She came from distinguished circus blood – her father was Sabu, Ringling Bros.' legendary elephant trainer. Her attic was a museum of circus memorabilia, including old costumes and posters from down through the years, a collection no doubt worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, but the greatest bounce I got from visiting her was meeting Sabu himself shortly before his death.

This month, Ringling Bros. has announced that the Greatest Show on Earth is retiring its elephant act, and sending its pachyderms to comfy retirement here in Florida. Its reasoning is sound, its actions humane, but nevertheless, I'm sure Joy sees this as the end of a glorious era, and I join her.

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In alerting me that he'd be glad to take a critical look at "Cross Cypress", the 20,000-word story I wrote this winter, my UNC-Greensboro writing teacher Fred Chappell appended terrible news: **Eve Shelnuitt** was no longer living.

When she was my fellow student in Fred's Master of Fine Arts program, she had an earthy, unassuming femininity that could be stunning: she looked like Alanis Morissette's older sister. Harlan Ellison once guested at a class she taught in Ohio and razzed her about her short dress. UNC-G girls adored her, even though she was a tough teacher. A student later wrote of her, "She slaps you out of your complacency and totally takes you out of your comfort zone. If you rise to the occasion, she can change your life." She was like that in class, sitting in a dark corner of class, her shoes kicked off, her feet drawn up beneath her, listening to others' writing, she was cogent, precise, and tough.

Her story about her father's death, which ended with the simple sentence "Why talk?", blew me away. Was that "Angel"? She won the O. Henry Award for it. Her collected work included *The Love Child*, *First a Long Hesitation* and *The Formal Voice*, short fiction, *Air and Salt* and *Recital in a Private Home*, poetry, and essays on writing. An immature and untalented dilettante like me really had no business sitting in the same room with her, but it was a pleasure, a privilege and an honor. Evie was the real thing.

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I hope to publish a *Challenger* this summer, so if you're interested in contributing, by all means give me a shout. I have stuff on hand from Joe Major, John Purcell, Greg Benford, Mike Rogers. No theme this time. Rosy is starting a new teaching gig – I hope to, also – and won't have time to create the photographic family study we envisioned last year and on which I hoped to center this 40<sup>th</sup> issue. I'd be upset if this job wasn't such good news. Penury forced us to skip DeepSouthCon and will keep us away from MidAmeriCon II. With luck, we might return to being job-holding, con-going, zine-productive members of society again.

My latest reading has returned me to an obsession of my teen years. ~~Who else remembers Midwood Books?~~ The last two Pulitzer Prize winners have come before my eyes, and as I once knew and have now re-learned, their quality was stunningly high.

SFPAn Tom Feller put me on to *All the Light We Cannot See*, a World War II story about a blind French girl and a brilliant German kid brought together by her involvement in resistance radio broadcasts and his genius with electronics. Their stories are fascinating, intensely readable, and convey the tragedy of the time and place with subtle and surprising elegance. To these qualities add acidic wit, satirical brilliance and social anguish and up pops *The Sympathizer*, Viet Thanh Nguyen's mile-a-minute tale of a Vietnamese double agent dealing with the state of his country and his people after the victory of the North. It's funny as Hell, and I mean that figuratively and literally. The squibs on the cover compare it to effing Tolstoy, for God's sakes, but I have to say that the book it most reminded me of was *Catch-22*. It's just about that good.

Good old Pulitzers. When I was an ugly and skinny teenager they provided me with escape into a world of profundity and adulthood to complement the fantastic outlets of SF and comics. I read *The Way West* and *Honey in the Horn* and *The Travels of Jamie McPheeters* (exciting western stuff) and *Advise and Consent* – (pretty silly, in retrospect) and *The Town* by Conrad Richter and *The Store* by T.S. Stripling (impressing a girlfriend, who was distantly related to the writer). I read *Laughing Boy* and *The Caine Mutiny* and *The Edge of Sadness* (Indians and World War II and priests, oh my) and *tried* to get into *A Fable* (Faulkner was too much for me at that point in life). I read Edna Ferber's *So Big* and *Lamb in His Bosom* and *The Able McLaughlins* and learned about pioneer life. I read *The Good Earth*. I even read *Gone with the Wind*. Don't think of it as a Pulitzer Prize novel, do you? I discovered my favorite novel, ever – *All the King's Men*.

And then I grew up. Occasionally a Pulitzer novel would come before me and be read – Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, for instance, one time our genre hit the big time – but I never sought out a book just because it won one. Maybe I should. Awards, after all, are a pathway to someone's idea of quality – as good a guide through all that's published as anything else. I've re-caught the library bug, so expense won't be a factor. Hmm, Pulitzers ... yes, maybe they'll do, until the Hugos come to their senses.