

SPARTACUS

number 1 II

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Illustration by Tom van Sant, stolen from the Bantam paperback edition of the Howard Fast novel



I

I first thought to do a zine of opinions and commentary and give it the name *Spartacus* several years ago. I'm rather ashamed of what convinced me to wait. It was seeing the name on a *gay travel guide*. I thought it pretty obvious – and pretty icky – why that community would find the title attractive, so I dropped the idea. I liked the name “Spartacus” because it carried the patina of liberation and freedom. I couldn't care less how Kirk Douglas looked in short-shorts. Such is cis-male ignorance and prejudice. Note my hip word usage. (What's a cis-male again? Is that different from last week?)

I've since realized that the wish for freedom is a pretty universal impulse. Why, I've come to realize, couldn't the guide's use of the title *also* be linked to liberation? (Bruno Gmunder Verlag, its editor, doesn't say why he chose it – he just provides a service for his audience. And the name for a Sasha Baron Cohen film, but there I go again.)

Basically, I'm with my title boy. I believe in freedom, and that includes freedom from crap.

The maturation of my attitude towards gays is directly related to SF fandom, and I'm going to tell the story.

I first ran into gays through rumors and bad jokes in that zit-encrusted era of life, junior high school. In high school I encountered the first guy whom I subsequently decided was gay – a handsome dude, a performer, who pestered me throughout my senior year to go touring with him. I found him a nuisance but don't recall ever consciously thinking him gay. Then there was the well-known SF fan at St. Louiscon who came up to me as I was reading a newspaper in the hotel lobby and tried to get me to go upstairs with him. Again, I rebuffed the idea, but I don't recall knowing he was up to. (And I thought I was unattractive back then. Just to the people I *wanted* attracted to me, I guess.)

No mistaking the intent of the creep in the SanFran bus station washroom, who kept sidling up to me and peering over my shoulder while I was trying to take a leak. The plug freaked me out so much that my bladder seized up. I've never forgotten the expression on that shit-head's pasty face. There was no expression. It was utterly lifeless. Blank dumb ugly lust was thenceforth the face of homosexuality as far as I was concerned.

Until I met a couple of homosexual guys who were willing to talk with me. Or rather, *to* me. About themselves.

The first fella's name was Bill, and he was a familiar and well-liked member of Southern fandom. He had a light heart and an overt attitude and so I, being young and stupid, didn't think anything of making teasing comments about his being gay. Until he called me over and very kindly, and with downcast eyes, told me how it had hurt his feelings.

He talked about how he had had to learn to deal with his homosexuality, how tough it was, his family problems, but how he had found friendship in fandom. He said something else. He talked about how he trusted me, despite my thick headedness, because we were both fans, and – I just remembered this as this line was being typed, I swear – he mentioned *love*, for that was what he felt for his fellow fans. Including me, God knoweth why...

Well, that got through. I restrained the jokes out of my extended adolescence and Bill and I got along fine for as long as we had him. We lost him to the plague in the early eighties.

The other fella was named George. I had a lot in common with George. We were both vets of the antiwar movement, from well-known liberal bastions of higher learning, peripheral hippies, moderately left-wing. We were also both deeply devoted to Southern fandom and the Southern Fandom Press Alliance. George was a big dude with a gentle, musical voice, and unlike Bill I had no idea that he was gay.

That changed when I made an ugly comment about a dude who had propositioned a mutual friend while he was hitch-hiking. I'm afraid I used a term that is not only not-PC, but is no longer acceptable in civilized company. He didn't respond immediately, but instead wrote me a letter after the convention where I told the story. Like Bill, George had the courage to *explain* the seemingly offensive behavior, not out of any need to apologize but with an abiding, fundamental insistence on his own dignity and the dignity of gay people. Nor did he hector, or lecture, or threaten me with the contempt of others; this was a friend in true, who would chide me for being an asshole while maintaining faith that I would listen.

George painted a picture of people who had a hard and almost inexplicably difficult time moving through life, finding mates, learning to like themselves. He cited Sebastian Venable and other guilt-ridden homosexuals from popular culture, complaining that it was hard to find role models there who gave a damn about one another – which, he silently insisted I believe, real gay people do.

The lesson took its time to take, but it took. These guys didn't preach at me. Their lesson was one so deep and so fundamental that no amount of preaching could get it across. PC hadn't caught on as a social tactic when we had our encounters, and they weren't the type to badger or shame you with the fear of social unacceptance anyway. (George *hated* PC.) I believed them – I understood them – I accepted what they said – because they were friends. They always told the truth, and they spoke truth to friendship.

I don't think I've ever trusted anyone as much as I trusted George. We lost him this very month.

And so, when the controversy came up about gay marriage, I demanded to know, why not? The most basic tenet of law is that no right should be denied someone unless it hurts another. *What harm does it do?* is therefore the first hurdle anyone attacking gay marital rights has to jump. Thus my ridiculed statement in my recent *Zine Dump* stating that gay marriage is *no skin off my nose*. Let gay people get married because it doesn't hurt me – or anybody. If an opponent claims there's harm in the idea, let's hear him define it. But I've heard no claims of harm that make sense.

Besides, a couple of very fine, brave friends trusted me enough to know that I'd insist, in their name, that life play fair.

II

The maniac responsible ... the Zimmerman case.

As a defense lawyer, I have to look on criminal trials in a way laymen might not understand. No criminal case is a search for truth. All are an attempt by a sovereign, a government, to prove to a disinterested selection of ordinary citizens that a particular person has committed a particular act. What the citizens, the jury, evaluate is the certitude of the government's case. The standard it must reach is proof beyond a reasonable doubt. What that means is left entirely to the jurors' judgment. When a state fails, a Not Guilty verdict is mandated by law. We are always – *always* – supposed to look on a Not Guilty as a failure of the state to do its job.

But of course, this is not always the case. Sometimes a jury can be simply insane.

A bigoted community will produce bigoted jurors. Everyone has seen this. The twisted results in the Jim Crow years ... the Greensboro Klan massacre ... O.J. Simpson ... the cops who beat Rodney King. Some would cite the Casey Anthony case (though I would not). I myself got used to seeing vapid and biased juries acquit defendants who were obviously guilty in Orleans Parish – and convict in questionable cases just across the Mississippi River. (Jefferson Parish was the richest and best-educated community in Louisiana – and the most racist. Go figure.) Strangely enough, the conservative military venue I've practiced in of recent – Bossier Parish – has shown no such bias; the intelligence and independent judgment demanded by the US military seems to have overcome it.

The lesson? For lawyers, it's better *voir dire*. *Choose smart jurors*. Smarter, please, than the limited panel in July's George Zimmerman tragedy.

Respect for any verdict is mandated by what I call the social contract, the unconscious agreement among members of a community that keep it going. But that's a limited respect. As after the Simpson decision, I must acknowledge that the state cannot punish the defendant. Such was the legal verdict of a legally – if suspiciously – seated jury. That doesn't mean I have to agree with that jury's judgment as to what happened, or who is responsible. I see no reason to respect a verdict based in untruth, bias or illogic. Need we respect the verdict that convicted the Scottsboro Boys? Of course not.

The Zimmerman juror interviewed after the trial was obviously biased – but I doubt she knew it. Her bias was so deeply ingrained that it was as natural to her as metabolism. To her, to her whole panel, to that whole community, black people were to be feared, and any act stemming from that fear was justified. If someone were to brace them and say what I just wrote, they'd deny it – but I think it'd be the denial of the blind that there's such a thing as color.

Such people proceed through life without a clue, usually doing no harm – but then they do. They get onto a jury where their underlying prejudices get called to the fore, and they act on them – and they don't even know it.

Had I been Zimmerman's lawyer I would have chosen just the sort of the souls that eventually got seated, and hoped they would do just what they did: apply the law's protection to the defendant and neglect to do so for his victim. Had I been on the jury myself, I would have considered who instigated the fight – Zimmerman – and whether he had the authority to do so – he did not. Zimmerman provoked the incident that led to Trayvon Martin's death. Trayvon was jumped without cause by a dweeb without authority – if anyone had the right to "Stand Your Ground," it was him. Zimmerman was responsible. Zimmerman was guilty of Manslaughter.

It's crystal clear what the death of Trayvon Martin shows. The boy died because a numbskull with delusions of authority tried to live out a childish fantasy based on prejudice and pointless anger. He got away with it because his prejudice was – and is – a general and unconscious psycho/sociological fact in the community where both lived. While legal barriers between Americans of all backgrounds have been and continue to be erased, social and psychological barricades remain. They'll fall, but people will have to grow and time will have to flow – and we will all have to dare to be self-aware.

So what do you do with jurors who go into a trial with an underlying conviction that is contrary to justice? It's very simple. You spot them and you get them off the panel, and you leave them alone to go about their lives. With a smile, if you can. After all, by their lights they're perfectly okay people. By my lights? Let's be honest. Do I respect their opinions? Not at all; they're idiots. Respect their rights? More than they do. Respect their feelings? Not nearly enough. We're all God's children. They might not believe that – but they should. *We* should.

III

I'm including the screed that follows because the injustice it addresses – admittedly ludicrously minor – still bugs me. Who else do you know who is still mad about last year's Oscars?

The appropriate book I toted to the local opening of *Zero Dark Thirty* was *Osama*, Lavie Tidhar's World Fantasy Award winner from 2012. It's an excellent novel – the only book to best *Among Others* for a genre award last year and a spooky, challenging work. “Challenging” is also one of the superlatives I'd apply to *Zero Dark Thirty*. The winner of most critics' awards for 2012's Best Picture and Best Actress, the film got screwed at the Oscars, almost entirely because of a campaign of vitriolic and misdirected political correctness which assumed and bloviated that the film endorsed the use of torture.

Zero Dark Thirty is too skillful and too subtle a work of art for that contention to stand. It's adroitly acted. Jessica Chastain deserved her Oscar nomination and the many critics' honors that fell her way, playing an obsessed CIA agent whose focus and wit lasered in on bin Laden. I was also stunned by the young actor who portrayed her CIA mentor, a man who finally cracks under the ethical weight of the torturer's role. These characterizations didn't shrink from what the characters felt was their duty, and the craftsmen bringing them to the screen gave us no shortcuts in judging them. Most basically, the movie is challenging in that it confronted its audience with the brutality and the amorality that nailed that courier's name, saying *It is what it is ... we did what we did ... and we got what we went for. We abused prisoners to destroy a dedicated enemy of the United States and its people. Was it worth it? Does justice prime morality? Did that end justify those means?*

Questions are not proclamations. Anyone who thought that *ZDT* condoned torture was simply not paying attention. Contrary to the assertions of the PC brigades that assailed it, *Zero Dark Thirty* left the final answers of its most vital questions, including intensive interrogation, to its audience. *24* condoned torture. *ZDT* made us *face* it.

The movie *Zero Dark Thirty* most brings to mind for me is a little-known Robert Taylor flick from the early fifties, *Above and Beyond*. It's the story of Paul Tibbetts and Operation Silverplate, the dropping of the first atomic bomb. Like *ZDT*, *Above and Beyond* made no secret of the moral horror faced by its protagonist – and the moral justification that rationalized what he did, if it did. Finally, the question becomes overt. A reporter asks Tibbetts, freshly returned from his mission, “You just used a weapon that killed 80,000 people. The American people want to know how you feel about it.” He replies, “How do *they* feel about it?”

Which is the whole point.

As one who aspires to morality, I cannot approve of the way Chastain's Maya – a real person – and her kindred destroyed a despicable enemy of their and my people. But as one who aspires to justice, I'm viscerally glad of what they did. Thus the weak nation repays its enemies.

Zero Dark Thirty was simply superb. Aghast as I was at the Oscars slighting it and Jessica Chastain – whom I worship, by the way – one must remember the past. Other films have been neglected in their time, only to triumph in the decades to come. As with *Citizen Kane*, as with *Chinatown*, other slighted masterworks, time will have its say. Chastain will have her recognition, and *ZDT* will have its greatness. So there.

Movie recommendation: *The East*, written by and starring the brilliant Brit Marling. A veterans' hospital where I occasionally work appears as a sinister corporation's headquarters.

IV

As, rendered molten by the heat, we ooze through summer, worldcon pokes its Stetson over the horizon. Issues that come forth when fans gather are naturally on one's mind, and what seems to be dominating the SF blogosphere is an old standby: sexual harassment.

The question of sexual harassment dominated fandom in 2012 after the Readercon horror; I join those who think that standards – of behavior, of proof, of penalty – need to be clearly established before anyone is punished. So far, whether someone can be legitimately accused of harassment – and what it is – seems a matter of whim. I've seen interrupted conversations described as rapes. As my late friend Dennis Dolbear exclaimed when he heard about this, "Why not treason? Why not *first degree murder*?"

So here's what I think we need. One, a clear standard of conduct. Two, a well-understood procedure to handle complaints. In that wise, Carol Kennedy wrote a superb piece for Minicon 27 some years ago on what represents sexual harassment. I quote from it.

Some confusion exists as to what constitutes sexual harassment. We'll clear that up. First, what it's not: sexual harassment is not something perpetrated only by men or directed only at women ... sexual harassment does not mean telling jokes (even "dirty" ones); singing songs (even risqué ones); being half-dressed or looking at people who are half-dressed; putting your arm around someone's shoulders; asking someone to join you for conversation, lunch, or any other activity; or even propositioning someone – UNLESS YOU DO IT UNDER ONE OF THE FOLLOWING CONDITIONS.

Sexual harassment means that you say things with sexual content to or about another person, follow another person around, call another person's room, touch another person, or request another person's company after the person has told you "no" or "stop."

If you are on the receiving end of this behavior you have two obligations. The first is to say "no" or "stop" (describing the behavior, as in "Stop following me" or "Stop asking me to spend time with you"). Don't say "Not right now" or "I don't think so." Tempting as it may be, don't even say "Not even after the heat death of the universe." Say "no" or "stop."

The second is to report ... anyone who persists after you've said "no" or "stop."

I suggest this policy be debated, amended, spread throughout fandom and adopted. Enforcement should be a recognized part of a con chairman's duties. No decision should be made without interviews of both parties and witnesses, be there any. The penalty? Good sense and fair balance should prevail. A beauty-besotted swain whose ardor in pitching woo o'erwhelms his breeding – a guy who keeps pestering a lady even after she's told him to back off, say – should not be dealt with as harshly as a goodie-grabber or serious psycho-stalker. Such characters deserve to be bounced. Cue another personal story.

Some 30 years ago I was intimately involved in a stalking incident. I was something of a mentor to the stalker, an enthusiastic Southern neo who went nuts and harassed a beautiful young lady of our acquaintance who had just given him the heave-ho. He was quite out of control – I think he tried to set a fire in the corridor of her hotel floor. (I found the minor little flame myself, and extinguished same with a mighty puff of my super-breath. True story.) She was sincerely terrified. I got so angry I threw the foolish fellow out of the convention myself.

And, in honesty, I sit here horrified at some memories of my own from eras before Rosy manned me up. If I owe *you* an apology for overstepping my bounds in days of yore, please consider it made.

V

I gripe about PC an awful lot. What can I say? I've been dealing with it since I was at Berkeley and it *grinds my gears*. Let's take a look at its most recent, and noisiest, collisions with the SF genre.

From what I gather of the SFWA brouhaha, it followed the publication in a *SFWA Bulletin* of a column by my great friend Mike Resnick and *his* great friend Barry Malzberg which some members found offensive. Apparently they complimented a “lady editor” of the time on how she looked in a bikini, and used that term. Also, the cover to that particular *SFWA Bulletin* depicted a “chick in chainmail,” and chaos ensued. I can say only that if anyone in science fiction is more humane at heart than Mike Resnick, and therefore less deserving of vitriol, it must be Catharine Asaro. The brouhaha is foolish.

Making national news of late has been the proposed boycott of *Ender’s Game*, the film version of Orson Scott Card’s Hugo-winning novel. The boycott, it’s stated, is meant to punish Disney for bringing attention and profit to one who opposes gay marriage, as Card does, for religious reasons.

This has been correctly painted as a blacklist to punish thoughtcrime, and of course, I condemn the idea. It punishes the innocent – the other creative spirits involved in the movie and, if I can wax psychotic, the movie itself, which exists as a separate entity from its author. I’ll see it and judge it on its own merits.

PC was recently satirized on YouTube through a clip from *The Downfall*, a “bunker” film notable among that subgenre for the superior lead performance of German actor Bruno Ganz. His is the best Hitler I’ve seen on screen, easily comparable to Luther Adler in *The Desert Fox* and Ian Bannen in *The Gathering Storm*. The scene, in which Hitler pitches a hissy fit, has been blest with phony subtitles – and this utilized as satire – more than a hundred times. Here Hitler laments that when the SFWA gave this year’s Nebula to a cis-man (Kim Stanley Robinson for *2312*) it violated PC. Awards, shouted the faux fuehrer, *must* go to black women or gays. Point clear: PC = fascism.

We’ve heard this statement before, of course, and it has some validity. We’ve seen colleges and companies enforce non-harassment speech and behavior codes that go too far, that shunt aside free speech or humor to allow neurotics to install and enforce vague, joyless strictures on others’ behavior and expression. As if human behavior was a football game you can change forever with a solid tackle. Not so. I dislike the excessiveness of the comparison – feminists aren’t Nazis; Nazis were something out of Dante, and feminists are right about most things for the very best of reasons – but it is right on about PC itself.

Political correctness is a bad tactic – it doesn’t work. It’s based on the coercive exercise of power in the name of collective opinion. Coercion means that no one has been truly convinced, and ... well, choose your cliché: the pendulum will swing, the worm will turn, *opinions will shift*. Power will shift with it. Changes in behavior based on threats or opprobrium will be thrown off as soon as the threats lose their strength. And as western civilization has taught those of us raised in its bosom to fight being forced to do anything, lose their strength they will.

You change behavior by changing minds. And you change minds by human communication and communion. I’ve never forgotten the wisdom imparted by the title character to an angry feminist in Phil Dick’s *Transmigration of Timothy Archer*: “If you would conquer us, show us love and not scorn.” That was the point of my story about Bill and George above. “Faith moves mountains,” said Timothy Archer. “Love moves human hearts.” It’s worth trying.

I feel like a character out of *Bambi* saying this, but ... *Welcome, young prince. May you enjoy your stay on Planet Earth.* The same to all human beings and other critters born this month, this year. How lucky you are to own that future we SFers dream of. Say hello for us.

May all trufanziners within the sounds of my typing hie to this year’s W.O.O.F. collation, to be held at 1PM (*be early!*) in the Fanzine Lounge at LoneStarCon under the tutelage of John Purcell. 71 copies, send Purcell all details (pagecount and title) by August 16. J_purcell54@yahoo.com.

So that does it for this first issue of *Spartacus*, an experiment of sorts, not exactly a perzine, which I imagine will appear whenever I feel the need. LOCs, if any, will probably appear in *Challenger*. It’s very hot outside. Stay cool.

