



Derogatory Reference 89

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Time for another issue. At work I'm still copy-editing banking-law stuff and still dealing with the great leap forward to newer computer technology. I'm also still writing reviews for *The New York Review of Science Fiction*. Recently, I've reviewed the retrospective Alfred Bester collection *Virtual Unrealities*, from Vintage in trade paperback, and the forthcoming Howard Waldrop collection, *Going Home Again*. I strongly recommend both. I also did a general review of Dean Koontz's career as a successful escapee from the "sf ghetto." (NYRSF is \$3.50 per copy, \$31 for a 12-issue sub, from Dragon Press, PO Box 78, Pleasantville, NY 10570 or see:

<http://ebbs.english.vt.edu/olp/nyrsf/nyrsf.html>

The stamp pictures at the top indicate that the Postal Service has involuntarily celebrated my personal holiday. I printed and mailed my very first zine on 5/5/77, and ever since then I've thought of it as my fanniversary. It is also a Mexican holiday (not for that reason), and the PO has just added it to their Multicultural Holidays series.

One of the more curious arguments I hear in sf circles is that the people who read "literary" or "difficult" fiction cannot possibly be enjoying it. This of course leads to a Next Question: Why do they continue to do so when not required by school assignments? Perhaps they picked up the habit in school and can no longer kick it; perhaps they believe in literary no-pain-no-gain. Certainly, such literary types as Christopher Priest (the elder) seem to be denying that they seek mere readerly pleasure, or at least saying that writers should not pander to it.

But one of the advantages of the science-fictional Cosmic Mind is the ability to imagine things outside one's own experience, such as others enjoying, even paying for, experiences I am just as

happy to be able to avoid. (I am of course referring to activities like skiing and third-world ecotourism, rather than what you are thinking.)

Besides, I've seen it done. Lois McMaster Bujold has said that she could never take seriously the canard that sf is for stupid people because her father read it. My father did too, but he also took obvious pleasure in battling the complexities of *Finnegans Wake*.

For that matter, most of us prefer writing that contains words of more than one syllable, and one person's not-quite-for dummies reading is another's excessive literary complexity. I am told that Orson Scott Card, a vocal opponent of the deliberately difficult school, insists that Gene Wolfe, whose work Card likes, is not one of that group. He could have fooled me.

More generally, it seems obvious to me that one gets read (whether by the masses, or by a "cult," or by a cult of lit profs who are able to declare the work part of the canon) by doing something well. (This is an extension of the ideas in C.S. Lewis's *An Experiment in Criticism*, a book that has influenced my thinking for over 30 years.) For instance, some say that the likes of Clancy, Crichton, and Grisham sell because their work is ill-written, with cardboard characters and simplistic plotting. At the very least, we should ask why these particular writers do better than all the others with these traits, most of whom can't get published at all.

The masses are enjoying something that Clancy, Crichton, and Grisham do well (perhaps something incompatible with good prose, characterization, and plotting, but not the simple absence of those qualities). The literati enjoy wrestling with the printed word just as many people enjoy physical exercise. And successful writers please readers, for different values of "please."

Wouldn't it be great if Viagra turned out to decrease aggression?

ICFA

My spouse, Bernadette Bosky, and I have been going to the International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts (ICFA), whenever we could, since 1982. The one held this March was particularly desirable because Peter Straub was Guest of Honor. Bernadette has written several major essays on Straub's work, appearing in *A Dark Night's Dreaming* and the *New York Review of Science Fiction*, among other places. I myself am one of his relatively inarticulate admirers. I've enjoyed his work, particularly from *Koko* on, but usually have little more to say about it than "Yeah, wow."

Bernadette offered to do an interview with him and put together two panels of papers on his work. I was chosen to chair the second of these, as one is supposed to chair only one session per conference. (Actually, she wound up chairing two sessions, because the heads of the Divisions of Fantastic Literature in English and Horror Literature chose her, each without knowing the other had. Strange are the ways of Division Heads.)

We were all set until a few weeks before the Conference, when Pan American Airlines (on which we had tickets) suddenly went bankrupt. We scrambled a bit and found alternate arrangements, ones that required us to stay over Sunday night. That turned out surprisingly well, as Sunday there was a snowstorm in New York that closed the airports, so the alternative would have been staying over Sunday night without prior preparation.

For once Bernadette was not scheduled to appear in the Wednesday session. We were there anyway, and I went to hear Gene Doty on "When God Was a Gander and Girls Rode Wolves,"—fascinating stuff, as the title would suggest, telling us about some of the myths of the Altaic people, in what is now Turkey.

Tuesday morning, I went to a session entitled "Fantastic Potpourri" (finding titles for groupings of two or three unrelated papers is one of the minor arts of the ICFA). The first was Amanda Cockrell's "When Coyote Leaves the Res: Incarnations of the Trickster from Wile E. to Le Guin." As founder and Pope of the Church of the SuperGenius, which worships Wile E. Coyote as the ideal god for a time when nothing works right,

I wouldn't have missed this paper for anything. With a small plush Wile E. on the table in front of her as a visual aid, Cockrell discussed avatars of Coyote, from the mad Trickster-Creator of Native American myth to the remarkable female coyote of Ursula Le Guin's "Buffalo Gals, Won't You Come Out Tonight?" locating Wile E. in that tradition. I will state ex cathedra that this paper lived up to its subject.

The second paper was Donald Morse on Kurt Vonnegut's promised last novel, *Timequake*, which made it sound interesting enough that I decided to give it a try, after skipping Vonnegut's previous two books. I won't go so far as to say I regret doing so, but Vonnegut continues to annoy me. At the very least, he would have improved his literary batting average if he'd kept his word and quit writing after *Breakfast of Champions*.

At that point, Vonnegut had decided, as Leo Tolstoy did in his declining years, that fiction was evil—that writing it was a form of untruth, clever in the bad sense, guilty of leading simple people astray, and morally inferior to honest physical labor. But as a recovering fiction writer, he had relapses. Worse yet, he was still good at this despised activity, thinking up clever ideas, interesting characters, and witty phrases. (This may be what it is like to be a fundamentalist with a large penis.) He sometimes managed to live down to his ideals (as in the monumentally boring *Deadeye Dick*), but sometimes (*Jailbird*) found himself writing like someone who used to be Kurt Vonnegut.

The latest last one is about average for post-retirement Vonnegut. I had forgotten, or repressed, the extent to which he now writes in a gosh-wow style thickly bespattered with exclamation marks. There is his usual differently intelligent stuff about politics, in this case recommending Constitutional amendments whereby everyone would have valuable work and all children would be loved. As always, this part could be adequately answered by an equally subtle and complex thinker like Ayn Rand. On the other hand, there is also more of his subjunctive fiction, in which he outlines the stories he would write if he felt like it; as always, many of these are (or would be) interesting, enjoyable, and thought-provoking.

(I am prepared to suggest that Vonnegut has managed to be a bad influence on Dominick Dunne, whose long-awaited novel on the OJ trial, *Another City, Not My Own*, has the same sort of subjunctivity. Stumbling through the forest of dropped names, the reader finds competent trial reportage by an author surrogate who occasionally

suggests interesting possibilities for fictional development; but as we are informed on the second page, the author will kill off the surrogate before he has to do any of that oppressively creative stuff.)

The second paper session was called "Science-Fictional Singularities." (See note to previous session title.) This one was even better. Andy Duncan, who had an excellent analysis of C.M. Kornbluth's "Gomez" in a recent *New York Review of Science Fiction*, has moved on to Kornbluth's most controversial story, "The Marching Morons." This paper may be the final refutation of the belief that this story represents wish fulfillment on Kornbluth's part. As Duncan clearly demonstrated, the beleaguered elitists in the story are a vile and hypocritical lot. I would, however, respectfully dissent from Duncan's conclusion that Kornbluth was attacking the genetic view of intelligence that is one of the story's bases. I go along with the idea that what a writer tells you three times may not be true, but it is what the writer believes, or at least fears. (Kornbluth presented the same idea in "The Little Black Bag"—perhaps his masterpiece—and *Search the Sky*.) I still say "The Marching Morons" is a cautionary tale, and a relevant one in a society that still makes it easier for its more successful members to voluntarily limit their numbers.

The following paper was Carol McGuirk's discussion of the poetic and tragic aspects of Cordwainer Smith's writing, looking at it from a combination of critical, psychological, and mythical perspectives, rather than treating it as nothing more than Christian allegory or an expression of Smith's psychological problems, as some previous critiques have done. McGuirk mentioned a theory that I've heard before—that Smith was the original of the patient Robert Lindner called "Kirk Allen" in *The Fifty-Minute Hour*. There appears to be some evidence for a closer real-life model for Allen, perhaps a military person named John Carter. (Does anyone remember where this discussion was published?) Some of maintained that Allen, and all the cases described in the book, were composites, and McGuirk has found some intriguing hints that some of Lindner's images come from Smith. Joe Sanders concluded the session with one of his typically thorough and insightful papers, this one on character development in Michael Bishop's *Unicorn Mountain*.

At lunch, Peter Straub delivered a delightful Guest of Honor speech, discussing the ways in which we are now living in an alternate, fantastic, and perhaps even horrific reality. That was

followed by Bernadette's interview with the GoH, whose description in the Conference Program Book was a thorough and reliable summary, except that it referred to his latest novel: *A Cottage by the Sea* (1997). We'd never heard of that, so Bernadette opened the interview by asking him about it, and he was as puzzled as anyone. Checking to see that the reference to this mysterious pseudobibliion did indeed appear in the Program Book, he said that he wished he'd had a novel published in 1997, but if he had, he would have given it a better title.

Next morning, the second Straub session, chaired by Bernadette, featured papers on Straub and a response by the author himself. Bernadette began it by urging us all to go out and buy *A Cottage by the Sea*, to which Straub truthfully added, "It is without flaw."

Edwin F. Casebeer delivered the first paper. A quarter of a century ago, Warner Books published a series of brief guides to "Writers for the 70s." (They were mass-market paperbacks, and they cost \$1.50 each. Whatever happened to cheap paperbacks and cheap sex?) One of these was Ed Casebeer's study of Hermann Hesse. At that point there was a widespread feeling that Hesse's work appealed only to people whose reaction to it was "Yeah, wow," with a few going one step further and assuming that the books themselves could be summarized as "Yeah, wow." But here was a study that insightfully analyzed Hesse's major novels, bringing to bear a knowledge of philosophy, psychology, and Eastern religion. It's probably still the best introduction to Hesse. (I am informed that Casebeer is now rewriting and expanding the book; I'm looking forward to the even better version.) Now he applied the same analytical skills to the complexities of *Shadowland*, including storytelling as a fundamental form of human interaction and education, and how its role in the magical training the characters receive helps make that more powerful than their formal schooling.

The second paper, by Rhonda Lee Brock-Servais, dealt with that puzzling term "Gothic" as it applies to Straub's work, particularly *Julia*, pointing out that the book, rather than following all the traditional Gothic elements, uses the structure of the Gothic to tell a psychological tale.

It has been said that to an author, the ideal critique is "closely reasoned adulation." That seems a good description of the third paper, Douglas Winter's *Washington Post* review of *The Throat*. (I agreed with it completely. In fact, that's exactly what I meant when I critiqued the book by saying, "Yeah, wow.")

The luncheon featured a thought-provoking address by Scholar GoH Gary K. Wolfe on looking at the history of fiction categories, particularly sf, as tales of increasing chaos. Lunch ran overtime, not because of Wolfe's speech, but because of much introductory material.

The first afternoon session, which I chaired, seemed to be operating under a curse. It started late, because of the lengthy luncheon festivities. We needed a VCR and monitor, and these had not been provided, so I had to hunt them down in another meeting room. This effort turned out to be very much worthwhile, as Mary Pharr's paper on the movie version of *Ghost Story* included a video version of the technique of Satire by Accurate Quotation. She showed several clips clearly indicating that the movie deals with an ancient curse that made its targets the helpless victims of bad special effects. Patricia Moir, who wrote a Master's thesis on Straub's work, presented a paper on the invisible world of evil and the repressed in the *Blue Rose* series.

As Straub replied to the papers, we were running so late there were a number of people looking in the door waiting for entry, and the chair of the next session made a throat-cutting gesture (no doubt a subtler literary reference than he realized). We concluded and departed just before the time the ravening hordes were scheduled for their session.

From there I went to a session on the Old Masters: Asimov, Clarke, and Heinlein. The most interesting of the papers, by Oscar de Los Santos, discussed Clarke's latest, *3001: The Final Odyssey*.

Clarke has always had a mystical bent, but apparently in this latest book, he is manifesting a not-that-shaggy reaction to some of the extremes the Space Cargo Cultists, those who saw the monolith in *2001* as a sign of beneficent aliens who are going to take over and be nice to us. (Which is at least an improvement over the main interpretation of the monolith in some of the crowds I hung out with when the picture came out—a *really huge* lump of hash.)

Thus to a discussion of Junk Science in general, from the tabloids to science-as-white-male-dogma stuff in *Social Text*. There was so much agreement that I felt inspired to say a few words against Scientific Correctness, the sort of approach that says, for instance, that evolution *disproves* Divine guidance in the development of humanity, rather than offering a model that does not require that hypothesis. I mentioned the attempt by a scientific organization to suppress Velikovsky's ideas by boycotting his publisher's

textbooks, in which the scientists not only violated the principles on which science operates, but gave the lure of the forbidden to some fairly obvious crankery.

Bernadette may be looking at some of these areas. She has been working on a study of fantastic fiction by authors who are on record as believing in something like the supernatural ideas they treat in their fiction—a study that covers brilliant and creative writers like Philip K. Dick and Charles Williams, as well as the likes of Taylor Caldwell and Frank Peretti. She may consider some of those who have done individual works that have been described as both "fiction" and "nonfiction," such as Whitley Strieber and Carlos Castaneda.

I must say I am not convinced by Strieber's tales of aliens getting to the bottom of things with their penetrating analyses of our deep-seated fundamentals. I have no disagreement with the consensus that Strieber is quite sincere, and that *something* happened to him, but I don't find his aliens credible. Perhaps this just means that I am hiding from myself the repressed effects of an encounter with aliens who made off with me to give me a rectal probe, but then decided I was too ugly.

On the other hand, I am quite willing to stipulate that Castaneda's first book, *The Teachings of Don Juan*, actually happened, if only because that makes for a more interesting metanarrative.

To wit: Castaneda goes to Mexico as a social scientist, to study the quaint native behaviors. He meets Don Juan and starts to study Don Juan's magick. The next thing Castaneda knows, he has called up something he can't put down: He believes in this stuff, and it scares the social science out of him. He flees back to the USA, where he does a Structural Analysis of Don Juan's magick, which is to say, he performs upon it the banishing rituals of the Anthropologist tribe. This calms him to the point where he can revisit the frightening area, though only in his imagination, making up further books about Don Juan. (I am prepared to accept the possibility that this approach of mine is too credulous.)

In the evening, John Clute and Gary K. Wolfe discussed Thomas M. Disch's forthcoming nonfiction book, *The Dreams Our Stuff Is Made Of*, apparently the latest and greatest chapter in Disch's continuing flow of bile and derision aimed at the field he once belonged to. The discussion made me more eager to see what Disch has come up with this time, preferably without paying for it.

Saturday Bernadette chaired another panel, this one on Stephen King's *The Shining*. The first paper was one of Tony Magistrale's typically thorough and incisive discussions, this one on the symbolism of the photo album Jack Torrance discovers. The second paper was a four-part harmony, a multilog by four people comparing and contrasting the book, movie, and miniseries of *The Shining*. I thought the approach worked quite well. One of the writers was absent, so Bernadette read her part, thus having the unusual experience of channeling a living person. It is things like this that make me realize why we are called "Fantastic Registrants."

One final performance remained: the Guest of Honor Reading on Saturday. Straub read from "Mr. Clubb and Mr. Cuff," a new novella that appears in the original anthology *Murder for Revenge* [Delacorte hc], edited by Otto Penzler. The reading was so delightful that we purchased the book, even though it is a hardcover, and we were interested in only the one story. I have now read it.

Yeah, wow.

Well, I guess I can say a little more. Although I cannot do justice to the references to Classic American Lit (our attention is specifically directed to "Bartleby, the Scrivener"), I can tell you that the story is unsurprisingly eloquent, that its first-person narrator is compelling, and mainly that while it is suffused with moral seriousness, it is also unbelievably funny. Read it.

Petty Complaints

There are always schedule conflicts, and I would not claim I could do a better scheduling job than those who do it now. Still, Friday morning started off with simultaneous sessions on Female Authorship and the Tale of Terror, Women and the Fantastic, and The Fantasy of Ursula K. Le Guin. The second Straub session was simultaneous with one on Stephen King and Clive Barker. Then of course there were individual papers I had to skip because of the sessions they were opposite, even though I knew from the presenter and subject that I'd find them interesting, like William Schuyler on Egan and Olena Saciuk on Silverberg.

The hotel seemed to have the Remedial Registration Class practicing on us when we arrived Wednesday, as we were informed that because the ICFA had a room block, no one could be registered until the entire block was vacated.

People

I should mention the pleasure of meeting and talking personally with Peter Straub and his wife, Susan, who works with an admirable project that encourages teenage mothers to read to their children.

I append my usual hopelessly incomplete list of people I enjoyed hanging out with but couldn't fit into the report: Jennifer Stevenson, Mickie Grover, John Kessel, Fiona Kelleghan, Brett Cox, John Fast. . . .

Plug for Next Year

March 17-21, 1999, once again at the Fort Lauderdale Hilton. GoH: Brian W. Aldiss. Scholar GoH: John Clute. Sounds like fun; we'll be there. In particular, Bernadette is organizing a session or sessions on "The Body and/in the Fantastic." Topics could include horror and/of the body; metamorphosis of the body; weight and body image (as in Stephen King's *Thinner*); science fiction and the reconstructed/cyborg body; bodily appetite and monsters or the alien; films of Cronenberg; the fantastic body and gender or transgender; fantastic depictions of the body as commodity; or any topic where the body and fantastic elements intersect.

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UPDATES

A couple of issues ago I talked about some institutional battles with New York University, but I forgot to mention that I was (and am) an NYU student. Well, maybe the word is not “forgot” but “repressed.” Let me explain.

Down in North Carolina, I had access to two major university libraries, UNC and Duke, as an alumnus of the former and a townie of the latter. Up here it was more complicated, but I eventually learned that NYU would grant full student access to the library to anyone who took an NYU course. *Any* NYU course.

So I began taking the cheapest course I could, every semester. When I wrote the article, the cheapest course was a single lecture by the egregious Dick Morris, presumably on important governmental stuff like letting your favorite hooker listen in when you're calling the president. You can understand why I didn't admit to my NYU connection. If I weren't such an honest person, I would have told people I was taking the course in writing porn.

A couple of writers I raved about last time have done other excellent books. Kathleen Ann Goonan's *The Bones of Time* [Tor pb] is that vanishing entity in the sf field, the single-volume novel. It has the same sort of inventiveness as *Queen City Jazz/Mississippi Blues* but also an admirably constructed and skillfully resolved multistrand plot.

Paul Di Filippo has finally written a novel. *Ciphers: A Post-Shannon Rock & Roll Mystery* [Cambrian/Permeable Press tpb] is a stew of sf, conspiracy, sexndope, information science, deviant politics, and general weirdness in the great tradition of Pynchon and *Illuminatus!* and well worthy of being judged in that company. As the narrator or author or somebody points out, it is full of “puns, riddles, distractions,..., said-bookisms (he ejaculated), authorial interjections (see what I mean?),...” and over 4000 rock & roll references. (You can call it what you want; he calls it messing with the code.) Not *all* of it works, of course, but a lot of it does. Some have called this book a post-Shannon runaway from the author's duty to provide a fast-moving plot that drives the reader to the conclusion, but this is one where the joy is in the journey.

Greg Egan has a new book too. *Diaspora* [HarperPrism hc] may not be the best thing he's ever done (my heart still belongs to *Permutation City*), but it's rich in the kind of inventiveness he's known for. (And it

provides another philosophical affront to John Searle, Richard Kadrey, and other followers of the no-meat-no-mind approach to consciousness.) Highly recommended. It also fits with a previous book theme in these pages: ugly covers. Unless you look real close, it appears to portray a red person with a bizarrely deformed nose (actually a sun of the same color in the background). Fortunately when I see the name Greg Egan on a cover, I don't care what pictures are on it; as Damien Broderick says, Egan is the most important writer in the field today.

D. Gary Grady and Sam Helm questioned my remark that William Burroughs was “the kind of mysterious figure that fortunately no longer exists in my part of the world: the victim of censorship, telling capital-T truths capital-T They wouldn't allow us to hear.” There are still victims of censorship, but the change since *Naked Lunch* is that I no longer have the sense of unprintable truths. Censorship of the printed word is almost dead. You can buy *Naked Lunch*, *The Turner Diaries*, NAMBLA propaganda, etc. About the nearest thing to forbidden matter is that suppressed untruth known as Holocaust Denial, and you can track that down if you're persistent enough.

D. Grady also engaged me in the following dialog over our previous discussion of “transitioning” and other noun verbings. He wrote:

Yes, boss, but you originally offered a general objection to verbing nouns and I didn't say it was always OK, just not always wrong. Do try to keep up.

The comment I was going to make began with “You're right, but,” but that didn't make it to the page. I hope this doesn't mean I'm transitioning to senility.

No, I don't think you're seniling yet.

Mordechai Housman wrote:

Actually, the things most people have been saying regarding Clinton are:

It's nobody's business

Starr should leave that woman etc. alone, and should not have so much power

Where can I get an intern?

In memoriam
Jackie Causgrove
1940-1998