

Back in 1953, when I traded in fandom for writing poetry, I decided that death had become a new obscenity in our society.

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On one side we have, let us say, Lester Del Rey, the NYCON III Guest Of Honor, who holds that death is perhaps the most natural phenomenon imaginable, and that he will have no regrets when his time to go arrives. Certainly he has no trouble in bringing himself to discuss the matter.

On the other hand is the vast and growing body of people who refuse to face up to the fact of death in one way or another, the people who bend extensive effort to avoid using the word 'death' and its blunt variations. For these people, 'passing on' is substituted for the reality of 'dying', and a tedious host of similar terms has been devised for the other aspects of this final reality. (The extreme of this attitude is well exemplified by such depressing phenomena as Forest Lawn Cemetary, which present a hallucinatory, tawdry denial that its customers are ever dead.)

I objected to this attitude strongly when I was younger and full of the juices of indignation.

Now I'm not so sure.

In 1952, Lin Carter got out of the Army and came back to St Petersburg, to discover that there was a small sf group. Its prime movers were myself and Felice Perew, and between us we had managed to acquire as many as a dozen profetans (none of whom remained in fandom, to the best of my recollection). One of the people we recruited was a fabulous woman known as the Countess, who had two small daughters, Fawn and Pushkin.

The Countess was a favorite of everybody's, and retained a considerable hold on all our imaginations; I bumped into her a number of times in the succeeding few years at the University of Florida, and then lost track of her.

Then in early 1958 I was crossing 96th at Broadway, and saw the Countess and Pushkin -- it turned out they were living less than a block from New Toad Hall, and she and her daughters were immediately quasi-assimilated into the entire Toad Hall phenomenon.

In October of '58 I was drafted, and only saw the Countess once thereafter, at a party of Lin's in 1960 when I had gotten out of the Army. She was a true phenomenon, and seemed to have the secret of forever being 29 years old -- while her daughters were ~~s~~lowing up.

Well, both Lin and I subsequently wrote a novel each about the Toad Hall and Nunnery days, in which the Countess and her daughters (12 and 14 at the time, '58) played big roles. My own book, AS THE SONG IS SUNG, I like to remember as a happy book, basically, and -- at least in its present form after three drafts -- unsalable. The Countess was in it, as herself, Fawn as Mariet, and Pushkin as Tristanne.

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I liked them. I liked them as characters, and I liked them as people, or rather as the memory of people, since I hadn't seen the Countess in seven years and the girls in nine.

Of them, the promising one was Fawn, who at 12 was still a while from puberty but who was bright as a penny and in some ways more mature than either her sister or her mother -- or so it seemed to me at least.

Well, I was talking about obscenity. Ordinarily I hold that nothing is obscene; that is, life and its ramifications are innately natural, and whether some members of the race choose to deny the reality of this or that, does not change the matter.

But Sunday in the first section of the New York Times, the New York Times visited upon me, helplessly, an obscenity that still makes my palms cold with sweat as I sit here trying to compose words about it.

There was her name, Fawn Fawcette, and there were the words -- killed by a hit-and-run driver as she rode on the back of a motorcycle. She was 21. It mentioned St Petersburg, and it gave their address, which had not changed, and it was true.

Technically it is not a tragedy, since as of yet I have been unable to conceive of any relevant catharsis following upon the event. Technically it is not obscene or unnatural, for death comes in a day to Spencer Tracy, two Roman cardinals, soldiers at war, and beautiful, intelligent 21-year-old girls, and no one attempts to pass a law to hold against all these wretched phenomena.

Yet it is tragic and it is obscene, and, as an obscenity, I have no justification for imposing it on your sensibilities except that somehow one must continue -- in the face of the most appalling -- to attempt to extract some meaning from all experience, even the tragic and the obscene.

Grief is private -- so private that I have not even been able yet to pick up the phone and attempt to communicate mine to the Countess. Perhaps also I feel that I might not be able to withstand hers. I don't know. That I talk about it at all is simply a reflection, I believe, of the incredible good fortune I formerly had of never previously having known anyone so well, who died -- or was killed.

I keep thinking I've found a place to stop, but it isn't true; the reason is that one stops when one has made a point, extracted a meaning, said something that is complete.

The only complete thing in all this is now her life; I can extract no point, no meaning, not even, curiously, anger.

But at least it does not come down to despair. In this respect Lester is right; the life process goes on and, most important, death ends -- but it does not erase.

Is that the meaning? It's not much.

But I guess it's all we've got.

-- Dave Van Arnam