

My Favorite World #37



Eagle-eyed readers of this here bloggy pontificatory nonsense are well aware of Your Narrator's affection for professional tennis. It's what makes the two weeks that wrap around Labor Day my favorite sporty time of the year. Yep, it's US Open time.

It's not just that your guide has attended the US Open – once at the venerable Forest Hills Club, where he had the great fortune to have the great Pancho Gonzales take a leak in the urinal next to his, and where the legendary Alan King deigned to sign his player program *and* flick a cigar ash in his, Your Narrator's, general direction.

“Have fun kid, don't get drunk.”



Such a sweet man. Nah, I'm kidding. He was an

arrogant asshole. But
he did sign my program.

Later, at the grandly named US Open Tennis Center out in Flushing Meadows, Young Narrator watched Laver and Connors and Rosewall and Stan Smith and some perky little blond named Chrissie playing her first big match against Billie Jean, &c.

The last visit in 1985 found Your Narrator yelling for/against Wilander and Edberg, Connors, McEnroe, and that guy who sounded like a disease. Gerulitis. Yeah.

And it's not just because that stadium<fn>Specifically, Louis Armstrong Memorial Stadium, nee the Singer Bowl. By another turn of fate, someone who looked just like me and had my acne attended his first-ever bigtime rock and roll show in LAMS, nee Singer. The bill was Jo Jo Gunne, the James Gang, and the frankensteinian Edgar Winter Group. The world, it is small.</fn> in Flushing Meadows sits across the concrete plaza from Shea Stadium<fn>Where, as it happens, Narrator saw Game 4 of the 1969 World Series, but did not, repeat, did not see either The Beatles *or* Grand Funk Railroad.</fn>, and in the shadow of the 1964 World's Fair tower/needle/useless phallic appendage, the selfsame place where the pre-elementary Narrator discovered *It's a Small World* in the Disney Pavillion. To his parents' everlasting despair.

Nope, it's none of this. It is that Your Narrator is a kneeling, evangelical mendicant at the Shrine of the One True Sport. You can have your teams of people running around like noggin-deficient chickens, your behemoths beating each other senseless between the ropes, your vroom vroom, hyper-steroidal go carts spinning round in circles, your various stick and ball fiasci. As much as one may like these games (some more, some less), it's the well played tennis match that makes the Narrator's heart fly like a vicious down the line forehand screamer.

One could go on here about Andre Agassi, or Roger Federer, or Ashe or Steffi or any of the others whose games have made the world a better place for years. One could talk about the epic amalgam of grace, power, speed, and brute physical endurance that makes this *the* sport worth watching above all others. But not tonight.

Because tonight, since Venus and Serena are about to face off in the quarterfinals – with Serena on a path to the first true Grand Slam in almost 30 years – well, let's make do with one curious observation.

After years of debating the visual acuity of every linesman and umpire, of disputing and arguing furiously over close line calls (“You CANNOT be SERIOUS!”^{<fn>}All linesmen insults are the intellectual property of one J McEnroe^{</fn>}), we have all gone gently into that good night wherein an impossible technology automates line calls so effortlessly that the “integrity of the game” has been purified to its most error-free essence.

It's not that the added drama and strategy around line challenges are lost on us. It's that we've been robbed of the drama and spectacle of one of our favorites being literally robbed of a point, a set, a match, all because a human being blinked or had a bee fly by or simply lacks the visual acuity to make a decent call (“ARE YOU BLIND?”). And that we have simply acquiesced, in an act of faith as deep as any Road to Damascus moment, to the power of the machine to determine our destinies. Even the most Luddite of tennis fans turns to the Chase Official Review as the Diviner of Truth. It is, in its childlike way, almost touching.

It may be more fair, but is it better? Alas, the jury is not out, but rather has bellied up to the bar to watch the Sisters battle it out. And that's where we should all be.

Why We Is So Dumb #1



After a sweaty August in which our local guardians of moral probity beat down a book that contained a few naughty words, and in which an arriving freshman at Duke University pounded nails into his own palms at the prospect of reading a book that featured two women *in flagrante*, Your Narrator hoped that cooler weather and cooler heads might roll in with the new month.

Alas, it was not to be. Comes today news of yet another college freshman taking a noble stand against a bunch of books he has never – and never will – read. Read his complaints if you want; there's really nothing behind it other than a ploy for attention, a cynical career move.

This wannabe George Will knockoff<fn>Really, just look at that smirking cockknob and tell me he didn't stand in front of a mirror to practice looking like George Effing Will.</fn> takes an impassioned stand on something he knows nothing about and paints a picture of crazed liberalism running amok on our campuses where poor, besieged patriots like him are cowering in terror. The usual array of far-right websites picks up his story, leading other people who never read these books to fulminate against the atrocities inflicted by liberalism on our once-great nation. And a bunch of people who desperately wish to believe that they are under assault from mean old liberals find another reason to live another day. Never mind

that his description of the books bears no semblance to reality, or that the course is one of several dozen *optional* seminars offered to University of North Carolina freshmen. He's here to tell you that he's suffering, and you should, too.

In an upcoming installment of *We Is So Dumb*, Your Narrator will find himself uncharacteristically generous in his assessment of human nature, freely stipulating that most people really do want to understand the world around them. In this sad case, such benevolence is inappropriate: this freshly-scrubbed whiner embraces blinkered ignorance with aggressive enthusiasm. But even worse, he zealously works to create stupidity among his readers by assuring them that not reading something because you think it might bother you is a good and proper choice.

It doesn't matter that his thinking has as much heft as a flea fart in a hurricane. The news stories about his column take that bland both-sides-have-a-point tone that makes most journalism as useless as a urinal in a convent, leaving most casual observers with the idea that his complaint has equivalent intellectual validity as the books he claims offend him. And thus does the notion that universities are hotbeds of liberalism grow stronger, and the desperate fantasy that "we" need to "take our country back" from some amorphous "them" attains another level of certainty.

The past 35 years have witnessed a mushroom-like spread of conservative "thinkers" like our boy Alec Dent, and it's no mystery why. Conservative punditry is a big business, and for someone with a more or less clever wit and a willingness to stand tall in defense of pure bullshit (at best) or grotesque misanthropy<fn>See, for example, Ann Coulter, among many.</fn>, staking a claim to right-wing outrage at an early age is a pretty savvy career move. Because no matter how low or outrageous, there is a network of think tanks and foundations and new media outlets that are more than willing

to pay for whatever depredatious hairballs the hustling pundit wishes to spit up. With great and inexplicable luck, our brave sycophants might end up with a sinecure at the *Post* or the *Times*; at worst, a talk radio gig at 6 a.m. in a mid-tier market awaits the pundit who is willing to say anything without regard to veracity or simple human decency.

We Is So Dumb because people like this – anti-intellectual and cock-struttingly proud of his ignorance – are the recipients of approbation instead of fierce mockery and ridicule. In a sane world, someone would take this boy aside and let him know, gently, that he is displaying his ass in public, and should perhaps reconsider such juvenalia. Alas, such juvenalia has become a profitable business.

Be on the lookout soon for this Tar Heel putz – along with his kindred spirit from Duke – to publish a followup wherein he describes how hard it is for a sanctimonious humbug to find acceptance on a libertine campus while the jackboot of secular humanism has his neck pinned to the floor. He will, if he's smart, describe an almost-consummated sexual encounter which throws shade and shame on some loose-moraled wench against whom he resists Galahadishly, and boy is he glad he saved himself, though most people will read that he protests way, way too much. Which of course the "legitimate" media will cover, because these kids are now famous thought leaders who speak for a generation. In 30 years, one of these guys will replace the retiring Ross Douthat on the *NY Times* op-ed page, while the other will probably be running the *Breitbart Sanitarium for the Chuzzlewitted*, and people will read their twaddle and assume that their presence in a newspaper or on their Internet machine means that they are in fact "legitimate". Thus will this plague of Dumb pass from one generation to the next.

So cooler heads are in short supply, and it remains hotter than a sac of Balinese monkey balls, despite the almost change

in season. It is to despair, no question.

My Favorite World #36



Life brings you moments, events that are pebbles tossed into our little ponds. Most of them pass by, one to the next, leaving little trace. Lots of our moments roll right by without us realizing that there was a moment at all; we may notice ripples later on<fn>Sometimes years later.</fn> and wonder where they came from. Some make more of a splash, are harder to ignore. Either way, the moments accumulate and define what we become, our tastes, our habits, our passions.

And some moments land like a boulder. You see it happening, you know it's happening, and you know that nothing is ever going to be the same again.

So it was one April night in 1979 in Athens, Georgia, when I went to hear some jazz group that was supposed to be good. What did I know? I thought Return to Forever and Jeff Beck played jazz.<fn>Hold your fire! They were/are great. But not jazz. No.</fn>

I walk in and see a stage literally covered with every imaginable gong, drum, saxophone, flute, squeaky duck, penny whistle, plastic tube, bicycle horn, &c. Seriously, there must

have been a few dozen gongs and bells, conch shells, and at least 20 saxophones, flutes, and trumpets. These guys had *all* the instruments. The low, pre-show lighting bounced spangles of dancing coins off these gleaming surfaces. I'd never seen anything like it.

The band walked on stage, several of the musicians dressed in African tribal costumes with full face paint; one musician unadorned save his doctor's lab coat; and the fifth musician dressed in street clothes. As per their custom, they stood silently facing the East for what seemed forever. The lights had come up full by then, and the dancing coins had transformed into a vibrant planetarium show of stars and suns. It was dazzling.

And then all of heaven and hell broke loose, with the thunder of a gong and a blasting cacophony of horns and drums and bells and godknowswhat that literally pushed me back in my chair. I held my breath almost the entire time, and when it was over I went home without talking to anyone because I couldn't handle another piece of information of any kind. It was the strangest, most compelling and frightening and off-putting and enveloping experience of my first twenty years. It was music, it was noise, it was theater and dance and kabucki.<fn>Though I had no idea what *that* was at the time.</fn> It was multitudes.

I had run headlong into what the AEC called Great Black Music: Ancient to the Future, and I knew that nothing was ever going to be the same again. That was the beginning of my lifelong obsession with jazz in general, and especially with what critics have been calling *avant garde* jazz for going on 60 years now.<fn>How old does something need to be before it is *apres?*</fn>

I had no frame of reference. Aside from the drum kit (which represented about 1/20th of the total percussion array on stage), none of the instruments were part of what had been my

pretty standard suburban white boy musical diet. I had to learn about these instruments and the people who made them come alive. I would literally buy 10 albums a week, and I was borrowing and taping a dozen more. At this time, you could go to the used record store and buy LPs for 2 buck apiece, 3 bucks for a double album. It made it easy to take a flyer on something you weren't sure about; maybe you recognized a name of someone from another album, or maybe it was just the record label, or maybe the cover caught your eye, and if a record sucked, you could trade it back in the next week for a buck credit. I couldn't get enough.<fn>Fun fact. I bought most of these LPs from a fledgling guitar player named Pete Buck. I heard he made it kind of big later on in accounting or something.</fn>

That's almost 40 years ago, and I remember that show and its aftermath as clear as a bell. It remains one of the handful of transfiguring experiences of my life. And it opened, in turn, a willingness to seek out different forms of literature, art, theatre, films...you name it. Seeing AEC led me to Coltrane and Miles and Cecil and Ornette and Braxton and the list never ends because I knew there was music out there that could surprise and confound me and disturb me if I just looked hard enough.

Here's a piece from their album *Nice Guys*. It's a pretty good representation of the way they would blend incredible composition and delicate ensemble playing with the wildest free jazz around, and even better, how they manage to move from one realm to the other on a dime, smooth as silk. I still have a framed copy of the cover photo on an ECM promo poster.

So thank you Lester Bowie, Joseph Jarman, Roscoe Mitchell, Malachi Favors, and Famadou Don Moye, for cracking my bean wide open and filling it with such a magnificent array of riddles and sounds and possibilities. I can't begin to imagine what kind of human I would have become without this.



And thanks to Mitchell Feldman (left), the guy who made this show happen in a time and place where such a proposition – a Deep South presentation of Great Black Music – was decidedly unlikely. When Mitchell left Athens, I took over his Wednesday noontime jazz show at WUOG, *Out to Lunch*; this experience was probably the most valuable aspect of my undergraduate education. (Photo taken in front of the Georgia Theater the afternoon of the show.)

The video below is a 20 minute blast of AEC at their best. For a dozen years at least, whenever and wherever they took the stage, they were the greatest band on earth.

Bad. Ass. Mother. Fuckers.

Respect!

My. Favorite. World.

Oh for the love of...



Well here we are again, a gaggle of bible thumpers declaring victimhood because a book threatens the very ground of their beliefs.

It's bad enough when a parent helicopters into a school to protect his little precious from bad words and strange ideas. But now we have college students sheltering themselves from the horror of a broad education. Assigned a graphic novel for summer reading, freshman enrollee Brian Grasso, Duke University Class of '19, took a look at Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* and declared that he would not read it because of the book's "graphic visual depictions of sexuality".

I feel as if I would have to compromise my personal Christian moral beliefs to read it," Grasso wrote in the post.

FWIW, the so-called "graphic visual depictions of sexuality" are all icky gay stuff. Naturally. To wit:



Look away! Look away!

Another student wrote in an email that:

The nature of 'Fun Home' means that content that I might have consented to read in print now violates my conscience due to its pornographic nature."

It's hard to tell, but I think this means he would have been okay with reading a steamy sex scene, but a pen and ink illustration of same would threaten his mortal soul. The grammar and theology behind the email make for a tough nut, crackwise. Perhaps it has to do with the confusion this book might create in re: a beloved children's book:

...OTHERS AS PORNOGRAPHY. IN THE HARSH LIGHT OF MY DAWNING FEMINISM,
EVERYTHING LOOKED DIFFERENT.



Roald Dahl would probably approve

I must lead a sheltered life, but I had not heard of this book before today. Now, thanks to the squeamish guardians of morality in Duke's Class of '19 – and, to be honest, this *intermède de pêche juteaux* – it has risen to the top of my to-read pile.

There's a bit of a skewed parallel between this kerfuffle and last week's tempest over *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime*. Is a skewed parallel even a thing? Geomathematically, perhaps not, but I'm kind of loving the challenge of visualizing one, so a thing it is, says I. If this offends, you can either write your own blog or organize a protest against my invocation of such an abomination to Euclidean purity. In that case, it was busybody parents invoking their right to "raise their children as they see fit" while not so incidentally depriving the children of less hysterical parentage the opportunity to grapple with new ideas.

In this week's episode in willful ignorance, it is the busybodies' spawn invoking the right to remain unsullied by ideas that are new or unusual.

School-wide book assignments for incoming freshmen are a staple of college curricula these days. It provides a nexus

for the entire incoming cohort to discuss, debate, and argue the merits/cons of a specific work. It does not ask that anyone abandon their faith or accept a new idea that offends them.

It does, however, ask that students at least consider a perspective that may be new to them. It asks them to begin to think for themselves, to analyze information that is new and challenging. And that, alas, seems to be the core of the offense that these tender lads and lasses cannot bear.

Exposure \neq indoctrination. Is their belief set so tenuous that a comic book would cast it asunder?

"I thought to myself, 'What kind of school am I going to?'"
said freshman Elizabeth Snyder-Mounts.

You're going to Duke University, child, source of 8 Nobel laureates, 3 Turing Award winners, and 25 Churchill scholars. These are not honors that typically accrue to people who are afraid of a comic book. Duke has no religious affiliation. It has ranked in the top ten US universities for the past 20 years.

Duke did not seem to have people like me in mind,"
Grasso said. "It was like Duke didn't know we existed, which surprises me."

More likely, Duke knows people like Grasso exist and they don't care about catering to their narrow minds. Universities exist (at least in theory) to expand the minds of its students, to give them access and exposure to information that falls outside the experiences they bring to campus. If a student does not wish to have his tender feelings bruised from an encounter with new ideas, there is a simple solution: stay home. Get a job or go to a trade school. Or go to one of the bible-based schools where the mission is to keep you

safely cocooned inside your ignorance.</fn>

The student is asked to read a book, not adopt it as a how-to-live manual. The student is asked to bring a sense of skepticism to the exercise, to read with critical awareness, and to come to some conclusions about what they do/do not believe. Until the next book, and then it happens again, believing something new, discarding something old, re-believing something old, and so on. In the end, the student arrives at some semblance of understanding herself – what she believes, what she is willing to fight for, what she holds dear.

“In the end.”

I suppose I should reveal the deep, dark secret around this: there is no “end” to all this. It lasts a lifetime. This may be the most wonderfully maddening aspect of being an alive, alert human being. Exposure to a range of ideas in the course of one’s education is a terrific foundation for this kind of rich, multi-layered life.<fn>Of course, this D.D. secret might be terrifying to some, to those who want an answer now that will confer certainty and foundation to every challenge that will come their way. These are the people who wish to protect themselves from strange new ideas. Those things shake the earth beneath our feet. Scary stuff.

I will give the frightened flowers of Duke’s Class of ’19 this much: They are not trying to impose their fear of learning on anyone else. They just want to be able to close their senses to something that scares them. And the powers at Duke are letting them have their way. That’s probably as it should be. You can lead a horse to water.<fn>Or you can lead a horticulture &c.</fn> But somewhere, somehow, a strange idea is going to sneak through and these students will be utterly unprepared for the shock.

By the same token, students who invoke the recently-

minted *trigger warning* concept should also receive consideration. If someone really, really objects to certain kinds of material – for whatever sincerely held reason – she should be allowed to opt for an alternate curriculum. Perhaps that student should reconsider his field of study if this happens too often, just as those who feel that religion makes them incapable of fulfilling their professional duties should consider a different line of work.<fn>Mennonite airline pilots, perhaps?</fn> But in no case should the sincerely held beliefs of one, or a few, or even of a majority, be used to interfere with the rights of everyone else to learn what the school offers to teach them. And if your school insists on teaching you about knowledge you'd rather not deal with, go somewhere else.<fn>I'm pretty sure I would not appreciate the curriculum at Bob Jones University.</fn> And it's way past time our society stopped privileging complaints based on religion over other kinds of objections. If a student really wants out, let her out, whether it's because of religion or gluten or an objection to the teacher's cologne. And everybody else goes on with their business.

As it happens, as I was writing this lament about how some kids these days are wasting their opportunity to learn and to embrace their humanity in full, I was alerted to a new opinion piece in our local fishwrap in which one of the local students affected by the *Curious Dog* kerfuffle lamented the loss she felt from the affair. This is a young woman whose curiosity for new ideas is undampened.

Here's a point J.W. makes well:

Telling students to avoid books containing "wayward beliefs" implies we are incapable of thinking for ourselves. The removal did not give parents the freedom to parent, but instead attacked freedom of thought."

That's the story in a nutshell. The fear of ideas and the

attempt to run away from them, to pretend they don't exist, leads to nothing good. Suppressed ideas become alluring, forbidden fruit, suffused with the aura of being "naughty" or "bad". The refusal to grapple with them in the light gives them greater power. And when the time comes – and you bet your last dollar it will – when the time comes that the sheltered innocents are forced to face the world as it is, the ground will shake and the walls will crumble. This story is as old as time.

I worry about the students who are supposedly 'getting an education' when all they are really getting is a piece of paper that says they hung around for 4 years or so. These people are a danger to themselves and to our society's ability to govern itself.

But then again, students like J.W. and all the others like her – curious, awake, alive – just might give this cynical old coot cause for optimism. <fn>For real.</fn>