

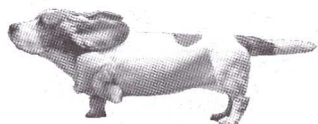
Why I Hate Romance

(And Other Essays)

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Dai Alanye

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Aardbassett Books

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The book is offered free for your enjoyment and to promote interest in my other works. Feel free to share **Why I Hate Romance** with other readers, but don't alter anything. After all, why meddle with perfection?

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Most Bestest Fortune Cookie Proverb Ever

I hear, and I forget; I see, and I remember; I *do*, and I understand.

~

Definitions for the Shipwrecked

You alone on a desert island = isolation.

You and one other person on a desert island = relationship.

You and two other persons on a desert island = politics.

~

Why I Hate Romance novels

That's right. Even though I claim to be a writer, I hate romance novels.

I don't hate them because they are girly and mushy, though they usually are. Nor because they tend to be formulaic, though they certainly do. Nor because they're the most popular genre, crowding out better and more profound fiction.

No, I hate them for far better and more specific reasons.

I hate them because the heroine is always beautiful, sexy, and pneumatic.

I hate them because the hero is always well-muscled, handsome, and cuts a wide swath in the female population.

I hate them because there's always some weird contrived reason for hero and heroine to meet. And when they meet, in ninety-nine percent of the stories the hero doesn't like the heroine for some reason—usually due to a misunderstanding—though he can't help but admit to himself that she's really beautiful and really sexy and/or really accomplished... but he still doesn't like her.

The heroine, on the other hand, after the fateful encounter brought about by her sudden poverty or by her inheriting a run-down property or getting lost on the moors or having a slight problem with a runaway horse... or by her coming across his lost/strayed/stolen little boy/girl/loved pet with whom she happens to get on just stunningly... or maybe after needing to be rescued from drowning or being sold at a slave market or having been forced to work in a house of ill repute or having her chutes fail to open while skydiving can't help but be impressed by his manly chest or his rock-hard jaw or his piercing gaze or his tight butt *and* his big fortune.

Yes, his fortune, for a wealthy hero is almost always a requirement in romance novels.

But she still doesn't like him.

I hate it that the heroine is always feisty or independent or at least spunky, while the hero is domineering, insensitive, in need of taming, or anti-social due to the lack of love from a good woman. Many's the rapacious pirate, evil robber baron, sweaty cowpoke, bare-arsed highlander, ferocious savage or cold-blooded assassin who has had his better nature brought out by a sweet but uncompromising woman... way too many.

And if by some authorial quirk the hero *is* sensitive, I tend to hate the story even more.

I hate the fact that the heroine often has some weird name that regular girls don't have, although it must be admitted that girls' names are getting more strange by the year. Consider sixth grade in a small school near me where three girls are named Taylor and four Courtney, plus Kerra, Kira, Keira, and Cara—not to mention Elise, Elissa and Isla. Whatever happened to Mary, Joan, Susan? Or even Harriet, Ethyl, Agnes?

I hate heroes named Drake, Duke, Dai, Damian, Jared, Jaan, Judd, Adrian, Abel and Alpo. Heroes! These are the names of kids we would have been picked on in school. (Oh, and I also hate Dougal and Fergus.)

I hate the contrived crises that bring hero and heroine together—the raging blizzards, the hurricanes, the leaky boats and car breakdowns... the predatory lawyers, the imminent serial killers, the onset of dengue fever or contagious leprosy, the plagues of locusts... the need to save a deluded world from a neo-Nazi conspiracy or conquest by space-alien.

It's always something—they can never merely get used to one another. They can't simply meet at a party and like each other's style.

Well, enough of these lists, because what I really hate about romance novels beyond and above these plot gimmicks is... they always end happily ever after.

Happily... and love is inevitably followed by marriage.

Gawd help me—can't one of them just once end in tragedy or separation? Ever heard of **Romeo and Juliet**, writer-folks? **Tristan and Isolde?? Casablanca???**

Gulliver's Travels????

So there you have it. Perhaps in the future I'll try to explain why I also hate Horror, Suspense, Thrillers, Erotica, Westerns, Mystery, Fantasy, Paranormal, Historical, SciFi and Humor.

And literary. Yeah, because I *really* hate literary fiction.

~

Highways (full of) Erratic Latent Psychotics

Following seven straight hours of sharing the road with what seemed to be an ever-increasing number of poorly driven 30-ton trucks, I stopped for gas at a truck-stop on the edge of Schleprock, Arkansas. After filling up, I headed into the restaurant to relax over a cup of coffee. And in one of those strange coincidences that seems to happen all too often, I saw an old high-school chum sitting in the professional-drivers-only section.

Feigning formality, I slid into the booth across from him and said, "Good morning, Mr. Royd."

"Well I'll be a horse's... If'n it ain't the Halster! What's it been—five years?"

"About that. How have you been, HM?" (His given name was Herbert Morton Royd but everyone called him HM.)

"Great! Yerself?"

"Pretty good."

"Whatcha doin' in Schleprock, Hal?"

"I'm on my way to Texas to work for a couple of weeks. So, what have you been up to?"

"Oh, I been a stud trucker fer about four years now. Say—If you're headin' fer Texas ya musta seen that nasty ol' accident north a' town."

"I couldn't see too much except fire trucks and ambulances around a semi. Know what happened?"

"There was talk on the CB he was pushin' five."

"Pushing five?"

"Five days, Hal."

"Five days isn't such a long trip."

"Nah! That's trucker lingo fer five days drivin' without sleep."

"You're kidding, HM! I hardly make it through a tank of gas without stopping for a nap."

"Only a fool tries to push five. Acourse there's some what does it regular, but they's nuts. Three er four's about the limit fer most."

"You drive that long without sleep?"

"Sure, all the time when I'm doin' coasters."

"Coasters?"

"Goin' coast to coast."

"Why during coasters?"

"Well, if I leave on Monday an' don't git no tickets, I can make it to Shakytown, sleep six hours, hook up to a new trailer and make it back to the Dew Drop fer last call on Friday night."

"Isn't that dangerous? Don't you worry about falling asleep?"

"No, not really. But ya gotta take percautions a' course."

"Precautions? Like lots of coffee and loud music?"

"Yep. All kinds a' stuff like that."

"Isn't working that long against some kind of labor law?"

"Nope. Less' n you start leavin' tire tracks over the tops a' VW's er somethin' like that, nobody gives a dang."

"So all those trucks are driven by guys who haven't slept for days?"

"Not them teamsters, they got it easy. But the rest of us get mileage."

"Mileage?"

"You know, Hal, paid by the mile."

"So the further and faster you drive the more you make?"

"Zactly."

"What happens if you only drive eight hours a day?"

"You'd best be goin' about ninety!"

"Ninety!?"

"Ain't quite that bad, but it's gettin' worse. I ain't had a raise fer two years."

"Sounds like the trucking industry, since deregulation, is imitating monopolistic competition, and your short-run economic profit is being reduced by the influx of new firms, causing your average total cost to rise to the point of tangency with your demand curve."

"Huh?"

"Every year more people start trucking, so the extra competition keeps wages down."

"Where'd you learn that fancy talk?"

"In college."

"Oh yeah? I gravitated from college, too."

"Really? Where did you go?"

"Triple C."

"Cuyahoga Community College?"

"No, the Cautious, Courteous and Courageous School of Professional Drivers."

"Impressive! Must have been tough."

"Sure was. Took the best part a' two weeks an dang near three-hunert dollars."

"I mean all the studying and cramming to get certified."

"Oh sure. Radar Detectors 110 an' Advanced Map Reading 130 were rough, but Weigh Station Bypasses 200 was a killer—a whole hour a' rememberin' and figurin'. Give me a headache fer two days."

"But don't you need special certification?"

"Heck no, but ya gotta have a chauffeur's license."

"I'll bet that was hard to get."

"Sure was. I had to mesmerize a whole pamphlet before takin' the test."

"Just a written test, no driving test?"

"What fer? When yer doin' eighty downhill in a forty-ton monster everybody gits the hell outa yer way — ya don't even need to switch lanes. Why just the other day some ol' lady had the gall to do sixty-four in the fast lane, but after a couple minutes a' tailin' her about three inches from her bumper she pulled over an let me by."

"I see what you mean."

"Er, you don't have no Christmas Trees on ya ya'd wanna sell, do ya?"

"Christmas trees?"

"How 'bout some White Cross? Black Beauties? No? Well, at least I got plenty a' No-doze."

"Oh! Amphetamines?"

"Willy Nelson ain't gonna be doin' no drivin', an' neither is Juan Valdez ner his mule."

"But don't you have to take drug tests?"

"No way! It's unconscientutable. Besides, you never see no cops er pollutettricians er teachers havin' ta take 'em, so how they gonna make truckers take 'em?"

"I suppose."

"Well, it was good ta see ya, Hal, but I gotta hit the road if I'm gonna make it back to Ohio fer my Saturday bowlin' fer beer league. You take care now."

"You too, HM..."

"Er, excuse me, Miss, may I have my check? And do you know of any motels nearby?"

~

Galluping Along

Perhaps you've wondered, as have I in the past, where national poll figures come from. When we read that Barry O has a popularity rating of 43%, and Congress one of 19%, the natural question is, "According to whom?" We might even wonder whether it's according to anyone, or if the figures are simply dreamed up.

Today, it is my intent to help solve this mystery. The answer is—it's according to my wife.

Couple-three years ago I picked up the phone to find a Gallup pollster on the line. After some chit-chat I can't remember, she asked, "Would you be willing to be one of our regular opinion suppliers?"

Gee! I'm interested in politics, and it was kind of flattering, so with little thought I said yes. She informed me that I would be contacted by mail, and there would be

minor non-monetary rewards if I filled in all the blanks and didn't scribble in the margins.

Soon a large packet arrived, loaded with qualifying questions. It was roughly the scope of a CIA employment form, but with less emphasis on the overthrow of unpopular governments. Actually, it was more like being qualified to purchase a mansion by a very thorough real estate agent.

And there were some poll questions as well.

Within a few weeks another package arrived—all queries about politics. This continued for a couple months, the polls coming in the mail every few weeks, but steadily trending toward commercial concerns. As I recall, that first poll was the only totally political one. Still, no problem other than boredom, and Mr Gallup always included at least one question on politics.

But then on the horizon appeared a small cloud no larger than a man's hand—or a woman's hand, actually. Two polls showed up in one envelope, and I was requested to give one to my wife.

She became a co-supplier of opinions for a couple months, gradually receiving polls more often than I. And then... And then she became the exclusive Gallup opinion-giver in our household.

Thus it has continued to this day. I have not been polled for more than a year—by Mr Gallup, at least. And all those itsy-bitsy gifts—the miniature flashlight, the book by some joker who used Gallup to generate statistics, the magnetic refrigerator calendars—those all go to the better half. Better, at least, by Gallup's reckoning.

I awake at night now and then to find myself asking the ceiling, "Why? How did I fail them? Where did I go wrong? Was it that time I deliberately gave false responses about my computer preferences? Was it improper of me to choose Whirlpool washers over GE? Did they detect a seeming lack of taste in my preferring Fox News to CNN?

Or is it that certain answers are just plain WRONG... according to Gallup?

I'll never know, of course. They don't reveal their secrets, hiding behind an impregnable monolithic facade of corporate anonymity.

But I do know this. If you've ever wondered who rated Hillary over Barack and the Breck Boy, or the Huckster over Mitt and Fred, wonder no longer.

It's my wife.

~

Why Sarah Got Second Place

Most people know Sarah Palin likes to hunt and fish, that she earned the nickname "Barracuda" for her basketball play, and that she came in second in the Miss Alaska

pageant.

It's less well known that she almost got first place, but I've investigated and am prepared to share what I've learned.

It wasn't a deficiency of beauty, for while the winner was truly good-looking, Sarah at that age could hold her own.

And she certainly wasn't held back by character. Who else among the contestants could have won the state basketball championship for her team with a last-minute shot while playing injured?

True, talent might have been a weakness in any other state, for Sarah could only claim marksmanship, and the winner sang Amazing Grace while twirling flaming batons. But this was Alaska, folks, so likely Sarah had an edge.

In fact, after the beauty and talent portions of the contest she was leading by a few points. It all came down to the final interview question.

"To what cause will you dedicate your term as Miss Alaska?"

The winner gave a sure-fire answer: "World peace."

Sarah said, "American energy independence."

~

The Herminator's Problem

As of November 2011 Herman Cain's rush for the Republican nomination has been slowed by accusations of sexual abuse, the accusers being two women of the peroxide persuasion. But that's not what is important.

What's important is that the women are white, while Herman is black. But neither is that truly important. What's truly important is that when Herman suggested these accusations were caused by racism, his co-racialists – especially those belonging to his own party – jumped all over him, criticizing him for taking refuge behind a myth.

From my viewpoint the accusers have zero credibility – one a bimbo and the other (at best) a neurotic, but even that has no importance for this essay. What is really truly significantly important is the regrettable failure of white liars in general to achieve diversity of accusation.

Massachusetts: In 1989 Charles Stuart decided no-fault divorce would be insufficient to his needs. Instead, he shot his pregnant wife in the head and himself in the belly, claiming to police that the crimes had been committed by a black robber. After being exposed he took a short swim in a long river.

South Carolina: In 1994 Susan Smith, perhaps taking a page from Ted Kennedy's book, performed a couple extra-late-term abortions by belting her two small children into her car before sending it speeding into a lake. She depicted herself to police as the

victim of car-jacking by a black man, and from behind bars now looks forward to dating again in 2024.

I select these two cases simply because they've remained in memory as particularly heinous examples of misdirected blame. Worse yet, they show a lamentable lack of creativity.

Sure, from a statistical viewpoint claiming a black man has committed a violent crime makes good sense—there's no doubt which race inhabits American prisons out of all proportion to numbers in the population. But think of the poor law officers who must listen to these unlikely tales time and again. Can't you imagine this dialog between experienced deputies or homicide detectives, their voices freighted with irony?

"Well, well, Chauncey – yet another *unidentified black perpetrator*."

"Quite surprising, Reginald, but press ahead with the *innocent victim's* statement."

I hereby protest against such banal characterizations of imaginary criminals!

If you or any among your friends and acquaintances absolutely must take steps to reduce an excess member of your family – perhaps a senile great-uncle or an especially pestiferous brother-in-law—be a patriot and do your bit to reduce the scourge of racism. Refrain from denouncing the generic black man by claiming something such as, "The thief reminded me of a blonde Viking hero with frosty blue eyes and a bristling reddish beard." Or, "The murderer was a small but menacing Chinky type with Fu Manchu mustache, who decoyed us with a takeout delivery of flied lice."

And should your crime be not murder but hanky-panky while seeking high office, try this one: "Twas no ordinary woman of the streets but a strapping red-haired lass with thousands of freckles who immobilized me using concentrated aphrodisiacal lasciviousness while accomplishing her Mephistophelian errand."

~

Jarl Torok's Death Lay

What use have I of mincing ways—of wile and craft and lie?
I, born within a thundercloud and bred beneath the sky?
Subtle tongue and monkish wile—what use when bright blades ring?
Dog! Haste on and learn to die. I was a man ere King.

Why slinkest thou in craven wise? Thy speech was surely brisk.
Thy knees are all a-tremble now—is life too dear to risk?
Thou hast thy shield and mailcoat strong, thy helm and other gear;
Come up, Dog! I've a sharpened edge to send a message clear.

(Ha! See, the fool advances now, his minions pressing near.
With numbers pushing close about he trusts to hide his fear.)
Come forth a few more steps, thou dog, my arms are not so long.
Thy rear ranks prate of glory... Soon they'll trill another song.

~

The Adventures of Farmer Mudd

It's common enough for books to be turned into comics. I well remember the old Classic Comics that attempted to encourage the "reading" of books by lazy schoolboys. **Ivanhoe, Tom Sawyer, Last of the Mohicans** and the like—exciting and often humorous stories were reduced to something with less content than than Cliff Notes. Sad, in a way.

But enough reminiscing. What about the opposite—turning comics into the written word? How often do you run into that, eh? Without further ado I hereby introduce the reader to an experimental concept: a comic strip in words.

*

Farmer Mudd is middling tall, spare of frame, and sports a pot belly. His expression is permanently lugubrious. He wears baggy denims with a checked shirt, lace-up rubber boots, and always—outdoor or in—a billed cap with various logos: John Deere, IH, Landmark, So-n-So's Feed, etc.

Mrs Mudd is short and round, wears granny dresses and scuffs in the house, plain rubber boots and a babushka outside. Her hair is pulled back into a bun, and her main accessory is a pair of granny glasses.

Mudd's neighbor, Jesse Planefokes, is short and rotund, wears bib overalls over a T-shirt, with work boots and a railroad cap.

All wear appropriate outer gear in cold or rainy weather.

*

Strip #1: *Weather Prediction: Mudd.*

Panel one, labeled July 10.

Mudd stands on the house porch looking into a baking hot yard, from which heat rises in waves. His wife is next to him, knitting in a rocking chair, and looking at him with a blank expression.

Mudd says, "If this drought don't end quick we're goin'ta go broke this year."

~

Panel two, labeled July 25.

Same scene except pouring rain, duck and ducklings floating in big puddle. Wife still knitting, stares at him over her glasses, mouth open.

Mudd says, "If this rain don't end quick we're goin'ta go broke this year."

*

Strip #2: *Economic Policy.*

Farmer Mudd and Jesse Planefokes stand on the edge of the road near an open mailbox from which projects a large envelope labeled **Crop Support Payment**. Mudd holds up a folded newspaper to his neighbor's view.

With finger prodding Jess's chest, Mudd declares, "It beats me how our gummint kin afford to pay these city folk fer lazin' aroun' and not workin'."

*

Strip #3: *Rural Finances.*

Mudd and Planefokes are standing by the end of a barbed wire fenceline. A fencepost sign on the left states, **The Mudds**, while one on the right states, **The Planefokes**. In the background are several gas and oil wells, with a drill rig in operation.

Mudd says, "If the gummint don't do somthin' right quick, the fambly farm's goin'ta be extink as the dinasores."

*

Strip #4: *Public Transportation.*

Jess Planefokes is driving a dilapidated pickup truck with Farmer Mudd in the passenger seat. The license plate is, MA-NURE, Ohio 20xx. A bumper sticker reads, The Farm: Love It or Git the Hell Off My Land. They have halted next to a pony-tailed hitch-hiker with backpack.

Mudd, with his thumb pointed to the rear says, "This here's a country limazine, sonny—you git ta ride in the back seat."

*

Strip #5: *Computerizing Milk Production.*

Mudd sits in front of a computer, looking down at the keyboard. The screen reads, DEPRESS ANY KEY.

Mudd says, "Yer stoopid! You'll never amount to nuthin'! Nobody likes ya!"

*

Strip #6: *Syrup Time.*

Mudd is driving a spile into the trunk of a maple tree. Beyond him, running down the road, are a line of vertical objects, all bearing spiles with buckets hanging therefrom. These are labeled variously: *Maple, Poplar, Spruce, Oak, Utility Pole, Maple, Elm*, etc.

*

Strip #7: *Air Quality Standards.*

Mudd and Planefokes are again conversing beside the road. Behind them, appropriately labeled, are a *Pigsty*, a *Manure Pile*, and a heap of *Spoiled Silage*.

Mudd says, "So kin ya amagine? This feller what lives in the city with all them car fumes and fact'ry chimneys belchin' gawd knows what, is tryin' ta tell me our air don't smell good."

*

Strip #8: *Respect for Animals.*

Mudd, Mrs Mudd, and a dressy woman wearing a fancy hat are sitting at the kitchen table, knives and forks in hand, with large steaks before them.

Mudd says, "So ya think our critters'd be like pets, do ya? Well, meet dear Petunia."

*

Strip #9: *Chores.*

The Mudds are in bed with the covers pulled up, he with his hat on. The alarm clock is jumping, and the bedroom window bears a sign that reads, *Pitch Black and Pouring Rain.*

Mudd says, "I'm a leetle bit ache-y, Maw. How'd you feel about doin' the milkin' this mornin'?"

Mrs Mudd says, "How'd you feel about eatin' with the hogs this week?"

*

Strip # 10: *Public Service.*

Mudd stands behind the kitchen table, which is covered with signs.

LESTER MUDD FER TOWNSHIP TRUSTEE

LES MUDD WILL TELL IT TO YA STRATE, NO LYES FROM HONIST MUDD

MY CAMPANE PLATFORM IS CLERE AS MUDD:

1. I will help my friends.
2. I will stick it good to my enimys.
3. I will keep the Feds off yer back.
4. I will do my levil best ta keep food prices high.

*

Strip #11: *Mudd's Sartorial Secret.*

Both Mudds are rocking on the porch, Mrs Mudd with her knitting, Farmer Mudd with a newspaper. Little Patsy, their five-year-old granddaughter, is visiting.

Panel one.

Patsy asks, "Why do you allis wear a hat, Grampaw?"

Mudd says, "Ta perteck my head, Patsy."

~

Panel two.

Patsy asks, "Why do ya wear it in the winter, Grampaw?"

Mudd says, "Ta keep my head warm, Darlin'."

~

Panel three.

Patsy asks, "Well, why do ya wear it in the summer, Grampaw?"

Mudd says, "Ta keep my head cool, Sweetie."

~

Panel four.

Patsy turns to Mrs Mudd. "Grammaw, why does Grampaw..."

"Cuz he's bald, that's why."

~

Tolkien's Crime

I have nothing personal against John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, although he was certainly a bit of a snob, didn't think much of Americans, and drove his publisher nearly mad. But the latter trait might be considered a virtue, and the first two can be overlooked.

His writings are quite enjoyable. **The Hobbit** can be well appreciated by both children and adults. **The Lord of the Rings** is a superior classic—a bit slow-moving perhaps, does less with female characters than might be desired, and fades after the final victory, but worth reading more than once. **The Silmarillion** is a great piece of

creative scholarship, more to be admired than enjoyed, but worth a reading by enthusiasts. And some of Tolkien's minor works are charming.

The early *movies* aren't anything to write home about, and the Peter Jackson efforts, while loaded with fine imagery, distort the plot and characters for no reason other than to satisfy the producer's ego. We can't blame that on Tolkien, of course.

LotR will probably outlast other fine works of fantasy due to its monumental premise, nothing less than the fate of the world. The **Lyonesse** trilogy by Jack Vance is better written, a greater imaginative effort by a far more prolific author, and an easier, more enjoyable read in some ways. But it essentially concerns the fate of individuals and one imaginary archipelago which Atlantis-like descended beneath the waves before our time, leaving behind little but legends. **LotR**, though, is in Tolkien's view a part of our world's history.

LotR is somber as well as monumental. Despite its temporary happy ending it is essentially a tragedy, for we know Tolkien's world faces ultimate decline. **Lyonesse** contains tragedy but the premise of **LotR** is a tragedy. And tragedies are more memorable than comedies. Check with Shakespeare if you doubt—**Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, Lear, Macbeth**—these stand far above the comedies.

To get back to our main subject, however—what is Tolkien's crime?

It can be stated it in a word—elves.

That's right, *elves*. Before Tolkien, elves in recent literature were wee tiny things on the order of Brownies and Leprechauns. Often conflated with Fairies, they could be mischievous, even dangerous, but were not beings of power as with Tolkien.

The Anglo-Saxons took them more seriously, as did most Germanic peoples. In fact, they had a name (names, actually) for it: elf-warrior [Alvar], elf-counsel [Alfred], elf-friend [Alvin], elf-spear [Algar, Alger], elf-rule [Alfric, Alberich], and others, no doubt. Our Germanic ancestors took their elves seriously. Elf-shot, for instance, could cause disease, weakness, death.

But literature generally forgot the power-elves until Tolkien. Since him, however, the genre of fantasy has not only increased to huge proportions, but you can hardly find a sword-and-sorcery epic that isn't loaded with elves, and they've even invaded the paranormal genre.

It's true that Tolkien built the popularity of other denizens of mythical worlds—dwarves, trolls, dragons, sorcerers—and they've brought along associated creatures, especially witches, whom Tolkien left out, as far as I know, with the exception of a witch-king. But dragons and witches we have long had with us, while dwarves and trolls haven't made pests of themselves to the extent of elves.

By way of a subsidiary crime Tolkien increased the popularity of another fantasy convention—the gadget or gizmo. Rings, primarily, but magic swords and armor also.

Give Tolkien credit, he handles the ring well, making it into something far more insidious than the usual magical device of myth and legend. For him no paltry ten-

league boots or cloak of invisibility. No... The One Ring not only allows its wearer amazing control over events—it also controls its user. Pretty good plot device.

One of the early re-imaginings of **LotR** was **Sword of Shannara**. In this Tolkien take-off a sword (obviously) is the gizmo. Magic swords are old-hat, of course. It is difficult to think of a mythical hero who wasn't equipped with one, typically named something on the order of Brain-biter (which, I believe, might have belonged to Hereward the Wake, who was less mythical than the typical hero.)

Tolkien's books are rife with named swords, but let's not stop there. Arthur had one, Siegfried had one, Beowulf had one, Charlemagne's buddy Roland had one (and a horn, too,) Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser have them. Anjin-sama of **Shogun** has his named Oil-seller after it is borrowed by a rather militant Japanese to filet a peaceful (but stubborn) merchant. Lewis Carroll introduces the vorpal blade which goes *snicker-snack*.

Even Childe Roland has *his father's brand which never struck in vain*, and when he to the dark tower comes for to rescue Burd Ellen, uses it to whack off the head of nigh about everyone he meets. (And to think all the trouble started over an innocent game of soccer.)

There is reason to think Childe Roland's sword might be named Excalibur. Indeed, scandal would have it that Roland is the son of Guinevere, and has inherited Arthur's sword. The question is, inherited sword not availing, who is Childe Roland's father? Because we know Guinevere had her failings.

[Interestingly—to me, if not to you—*childe* is Anglo-Saxon for *heir*, and *burd* is synonymous with *bride*, but probably going back to *birth*, meaning of *high birth*. So the Childe Roland story of kicking a ball and running widdershins around a church is not about children but high-born adults. Just as well, for we wouldn't want some kid running into Elfland and indiscriminately whacking-off heads. If you read [the original myth](#), not Browning's take, you'll also note that Roland is the youngest of the brothers, and I'll bet Ellen is not Roland's sister but some king's youngest daughter, because that's the way faerie tales should work.]

But I had better stop with the swords lest this specific gizmo takes over the whole essay. Let us get back to elves, those mystic magical creatures who presently infest almost all fantasy. And since this essay is becoming too long, I'll truncate it.

In brief, I assert there are far too many elves in today's popular literature, and it's all Tolkien's fault.

Therefore, authors, enough with the elves already! They've been overdone.

My Trip to Ulster and It's Restaurants

(or)

You'll Not Be Wanting That!

Twas at a comfortable cafe in County Down when I, a rapacious reader of Regency and Victorian British fiction, asked for the most common dish of the British Isles—mutton, according to my out-dated reading.

"Och!" the waitress said. "You'll not be wanting that trash."

So I fell back on my favorite, fish and chips. That, at least, had not gone out of style in the 90s.

I like food. Indeed, I can hardly imagine life without regular ingestion of it. What's more, I'm a tea drinker—plain black Salada by preference, or Bigelow's Earl Grey. A brief trip to Ulster was just the thing for someone like meself, a fan of British literature, sure and begorra, and with some knowledge of English history.

Let's see now, was it the eight wives of Henry the Sixth or...? Well, however many that early example of Mormonism managed to collect. The point was, I knew something of the Angles, the Saxons, the Jutes and their national fabric (burlap), the Brythons and their relatives the Goidels, the Danes and their female counterparts, the Dames. Furthermore, Ronald Reagan was an Ulsterine from way back. What could go wrong?

First, O'Hare airport in the US, where I learned something of Chicago hospitality. Oi! Given the chance, I'd advise the use of another exit-way from the US. And entryway as well. On my return I noticed an official using the preferred American method of communicating with foreigners—shout, then shout angrily when the foreigner stubbornly refuses to understand.

Second, my seatmate on the huge cross-Atlantic plane was a muscular young woman who, evidently protecting something of high value, kept her backpack between her thighs the entire thousand leagues. I had an aisle seat, so was forced to shift my knees to where the stewardii ran the beverage cart into them with suspicious frequency.

My son's family and I landed at Heathrow, and immediately transferred to a smaller, more genteel aircraft which flew low enough to give a good view of the Isle of Man. I'd no previous idea of how small it was, capable of fitting into a half-bushel basket. From our altitude I spotted neither Manxmen, Manxwomen, nor Manx cats.

At Belfast we wandered about looking for the customs check-in. Stopping a uniformed miss I asked, "Where do we go to have our baggage examined?"

"Do you *wish* your baggage to be examined?"

"Er, not particularly."

And that was that, quite different from such matters in the land of the free and home of the brave.

On to auto rental, where I quickly learned that not all Irish have a good sense of humor. (Sorry, Mam—I was merely joking.) Then for County Down, fabled in song and, uh, er... fable. I there began my acquaintance with English/Irish cuisine. Or *food*, as we call it at my particular social level.

The Irish initially made themselves scarce—our first B&B was run by Englishers. It was brand spanking new, as were the vast majority of buildings we noticed in Ulster. We looked in vain for bog-trotters living in shanties and stone hovels, finding them all replaced by cement stucco moderns painted in shades of gray and tan. The only stone habitations we saw were one tumble-down place, no longer inhabited by any but small wildlife, and a late-model version in the Irish-American Park, also barren of inhabitants.

But back to food. Breakfast was fine in certain respects. Soda bread I found to be a treat. Bacon was slices of ham, while in the US it consists of slices of fat banded with micro-thin strips of ham. Toast was strange. In the US we try to serve it hot, while over in Brit-land it was toasted, then put in a rack to cool. Cold cereals, available in wide and often pleasing variety in the US, were not a success, nor was oatmeal, which in the US appears as the more-textured *rolled* oats. But between bacon, soda bread and buckets of tea I was content.

Our first evening dinner was at a place which advertised continental cuisine. Could be, I suppose, for I'm sure my meat came from *some* continent or other. I'm guessing northern Asia—frozen mammoth fresh out of Siberian permafrost.

Immediate resolution: no more *continental* food while in Ulster.

Things began looking up next noon. We went into a quite ordinary fish and chips place where I discovered what became the meal of choice for the balance of my stay. It's possible to get good fish in America, but always, in my experience, at conventional restaurants. We have two fish 'n chip restaurant chains, fast food types—Arthur Treacher's and Long John Silver's. Both of these gentlemen are, as we know, creations of fiction, and their fish share to some degree in this quality.

That fish is the ubiquitous North Atlantic Whitefish, which also appears in grocery freezers disguised as breaded fish sticks, fish pieces, fish strips and fish lumps. Now I'm no expert piscinologist, but I strongly suspect it is in fact pollock or Trash-o'-the-Sea. It is edible but not especially enjoyable. In Ulster, I'm happy to say, wherever I was able order fish 'n chips it seemed to be real fish, either sole or perhaps cod, and excellent. I was also pleased with the chips (french fries) and peas often served with it.

Our second B&B, in The Glens, was run by Scots. Or so they claimed to be. The quality of breakfasts declined. We began, however, to meet some Irish. My son and his wife spent one evening at a bar or pub or some such, and were entertained by an Irish patriot who swore to the eventual freeing of Ulster from the treacherous Sassenachs.

My episode took place at a school athletic field to which I wandered one afternoon. Sitting in the bleachers, I watched a loose pack of boys clubbing a small ball with curved sticks. It was curling, I supposed, the national sport of Newfoundland. Or possibly hurley, the local substitute for golf.

In time an adult came out, dressed in sport togs similarly to the boys, and introduced a touch of organization to the practice. At this time I was joined by an older gent who began to instruct me in the wonders and joys of the game, its value for exercise and the disciplining of youth, and the virtues of the coach, one Rory Guilfoyle or the like.

"Rory, now, was quoite the player in his day, rampagin' up and down the pitch. None atall could stand before him when camaning the sliotar. And here he is today, still an iligant figger of a man, instructin' our foine youth in the high points o' the sport."

"Tell me," says I, "are there offsides rules in hurley, as there are in hockey and certain other sports?"

"Och!" says he, drawing a little apart. "I've nivver played the game meself."

Disappointing. Fish and chips, though, disappointed me never. That is to say, *nivver a-tall*.

~

In Space

Cast from my home while in a sleep,
Bereft of all I've known,
They've put me here—another test
To see how much I've grown.

The crater where inside I lie,
(Heat and light there's none)
Is where the answer will be found,
Far banished from the sun.

Groping for the nourishment
To physically survive;

Lost is love and will and hope;
Pure faith keeps me alive.

The hidden days don't pass me by,
For I control all realms of time.
And who's to know or to object?
It only lives within the mind.

I close my eyes and yet I see
The force you might call gravity;
Extend my arm and touch with fright
A substance only known as light.
Yearning, striving to be free,
I sense magnetic energy;
While every radiation found
Sweeps by me in a chord of sound.

Though shadows stretch beyond and far,
There! Future-door now stands ajar.
I've learned well here at your behest,
And long to leave this searing nest.
For six long days I've stood this test;
The seventh brings eternal rest.

~

Humbug! **or** **The Goofiest Restaurant Concept Ever**

I suppose no-one will be surprised if I admit to reading books. I further suppose you understand that I like free books fully as much as you do (ya cheapskates!)

So anyhow, I came across one in pre-publication form that deserves attention. It's present name is **The Humbug Bistro**, and is one of the most bizarre tales I've recently come across. Funny, too.

I won't give a link, but you can search for it online or you can wait until it's formally published, at which time it will probably cost money.

Although written as fiction, the author admits the story is true to life, with only names changed to conceal the guilty.

* * *

It seems that the author, Heather, is a chef of some note. I say this because she tells us so herself, and who would know better? She has cooked in establishments from the Arctic Circle to the Tropic of Capricorn, from Vancouver Island to the shores of Newfie-land, and always the finest of cuisine has been appreciated by her victi... er, gourmet clientele.

It is conceivable to me that she might have practiced other occupations. For reasons we'll get to, I'm thinking gangster-rapper or mule-skinner.

The gist of the tale is that Heather, after working for others these many years, wishes to open her own place, for reasons that are somewhat obscure. Making money does not seem to be one of them, for if it were, surely she would have gone differently about matters.

Let me interject at this point that *Heather* was a poor choice of name by her parents. Considering her disposition, *Alecto*, (the Greek Fury of constant anger) might have been more apt. Or had they wished to stay with the plant theme, perhaps *Thistle*, *Briar* or *Nettle* would have served. Heather, as she readily admits, doesn't much like people. In addition, she *really* dislikes people who invade her space, show rudeness or are intolerant of others. And don't inquire after her antecedents or native town, if you know what's good for you.

After some introductory verbiage we come to the first memorable scene. In a small and exquisitely provincial town lost in the depths of the Canadian prairie, Heather is decorating the building she has leased, a former coffee shop. The back door is open, and a neighbor wanders in, curious to know what is happening with the business.

Heather is *astounded* at this breach of decorum. The *very idea* that someone would assume an open door was an invitation to enter! Who could *imagine* that someone would wish to pry! How *possibly* could someone from a neighboring business simply saunter in without an invitation? Have these yokels no manners, no upbringing, no decency! What are they, Germans or something?

If I correctly recall, it is at this point that Heather's mule-skinning background first comes into play, as she requests the departure of her unwanted guest by means of basic Anglo-Saxon terms ordinarily utilized to describe reproductive functions and intimate body parts.

So goes Heather's first confrontation with the locals, but in time similar incidents follow, generally at the front entrance with potential customers for coffee.

"We don't have coffee."

"Huh? Well it's the coffee shop, ain't it?"

"It's under new ownership."

"But it's the coffee shop, ain't it?"

"Not any more—it's a restaurant now."

"The town's already *got* restaurants, so this has to be the coffee shop."

"Well, it's *NOT* the coffee shop any more, you *blankety blanking blanker*. So *blank* off!"

But the best of resolutions can fail. Heather has acquired, within the former coffee shop kitchen, an espresso machine and other coffee-making apparatus. To remove the machine would require repairs being made to the counter on which it sits, so after some dithering and rumination she decides to serve coffee. Like the fluttering of a Brazilian butterfly's wings that initiates a series of events which ultimately result in an Atlantic hurricane, this example of Chaos Theory will eventually trigger the downfall of the *Humbug Bistro*.

Heather raises the price of a cup o' joe but gives unlimited refills, only to find that many of the coffee-drinkers will not buy food. And it is on food that she makes a profit. You or I might see ways out of this dilemma. A: Give but one refill. B: Charge even more for coffee. C: Serve beverages only with food orders.

Heather's tactic is to do battle with the coffee addicts. But while she never loses the thrill of ejecting a customer who shows a lack of sensitivity to her ideas regarding proper dining, for some reason Heather refrains from ordering the predaceous coffee drinkers off the premises, engaging them instead in an unrelenting campaign of psychological warfare. They prove to be her equals in such a contest.

I was reminded of the battle for Guadalcanal.

* * *

One of the needs of the Humbug Bistro is personnel who can deal with the public, this not being precisely Heather's strongest point. After a certain number of false starts and failures, the two most prominent employees are a trainee minister and an ex-novice (or whatever) from a nearby monastery. Working for an atheist bothers them not at all.

On the other hand, Heather is apparently the type of atheist who believes in the spirit world. Later in the story a ghost manifests itself, and a satisfactory customer it is, too.

She lucks out in that the ex-monk is homosexual, though doing his best to resist the urge. She is thrilled by the acquisition of a gay server, evidently a requirement for a chichi bistro. The town, though (she assures us) "hates queers," so her business loses trade. Not a problem, for Heather values a degree of raffishness far above mere lucre. Besides, she gains a new clientele—men who sit against the walls and stare at her swanking server. Regrettably, they also content themselves with coffee, never ordering food.

* * *

Matters go from bad to worse. The locals squat over bottomless cups of mid-roast loaded with sugar and cream, ordering neither food nor fancy espressos or lattes. They would probably eat sandwiches but she insists on serving *wraps* (whatever the devil *those* are.) They demand soup, but she gives them *hot pots* or some such.

If Heather were manufacturing cars, her customers could choose any color paint they wanted as long as it was black. Similarly, in the Humbug Bistro her customers may order nothing but grand cuisine, regardless of their bellies' needs and wants. In the end, coffee and Heather's attitude doom the bistro.

Before the close, honest and forthright Heather reveals she is, in fact, a deep-dyed hypocrite, so outraging one of her staff that he abandons the ship before it has finished sinking. I'll keep this particular hypocrisy secret in order to allow you a laugh at the end.

* * *

Heather has a decent command of the English language and avoids most Canuckistan idioms, rarely saying "Good day, eh?" or calling her customers *hosers*. In **The Humbug Bistro** ordinary errors of grammar and punctuation don't interfere with enjoyable reading except in one case. Homophones trip up many writers, but Heather comes up with one I've never before seen or imagined. It's best explained by an example:

"There he is sitting on his *thrown*, and before I know it he's *throne* me out the door."

As I said, the book is droll and then some, except for a few portions where she feels the need to lecture the world on the importance of tolerance, good manners, and a laid-back attitude towards life and business. A great deal of the fun in reading it, no surprise, is to laugh at Heather's lack of self-awareness. Right to the end she's convinced of her own righteousness and wisdom, and of the utter stupidity of the Humbugians who fail to realize the favor she's offered by attempting to teach them to appreciate fine dining.

* * *

Almost forgot. While remodeling the bistro Heather has severe problems with local contractors. Whether painters, plumbers, electricians or carpenters—they all do a job halfway before disappearing, invariably leaving behind an invoice for work partially accomplished.

Hard-nosed, tough-minded, foul-mouthed Heather actually *PAYS* these invoices!

I don't get it. Any experienced person knows that most small contractors are in business for one of the following reasons:

1. They are independent, hard-working souls whose ambition is to acquire a reputation for craftsmanship, build their business to the point of hiring other workers, and gain a fortune so as to retire to Florida with a yacht.

2. They have been laid-off from a factory job for so long that unemployment pay has run out, and they must work to survive. These are usually handyman types who have some idea about which end of the hammer to grab.

3. They are independent souls who are simply *too* independent for the larger contractors to put up with.

4. They are alcoholics, willing to work until it is time for another toot.

5. They are Gypsies, either genuine or by natural inclination.

Type 1 contractors you offer a large down payment in the hopes they'll move you nearer to the front of their busy schedule.

Type 2 you advance a few bucks so they can buy sufficient gas to get to your site.

Types 3 and 4 you pay after the job is completed and inspected. You supply them with material from your own account at the suppliers, never advancing money.

Type 5 you decline to hire, explaining that your brother-in-law has agreed to be do the job for room and board.

The difficulty is, of course, determining who belongs to which type. When in doubt, assume all of them to be 3 or 4, the most common sorts. Good fellows, most of them, and often good craftsmen but... Well, you know.

{End}

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If you've made it this far I applaud your determination. Other essays might be added at some future time, or you may [visit my website](#) in hopes of reading more free content. If so inclined, consider sacrificing a pittance to read those below.

Feel free at any time to email me [flattering comments](#), sincere or otherwise, or to inform me of possible typos or other errors.

[Blood & Earth](#)

[Roger rescues Vera from a kidnapper... against her will.](#)

[You'll See!](#)

[Another campaign in the war between the sexes.](#)

[Hide the Child](#)

[Jancy abducts Robbie to keep him from his true father.](#)

[Lovejoy's World](#)

[Wally and Keira tour a prison planet.](#)

Other works are in various stages of completion, including sequels to some of those above. And remember: No superheroes. Merely ordinary people, much like you and me, caught up in extraordinary circumstances. Dai Alanye