

Keynote Address, Humanitas Prize Luncheon, Sheraton Universal Hotel

Father Kieser, Distinguished Guests, Distinguished Finalists, Eventual Winners, and Eventual Good Sports.

I was as surprised as I was complimented to be asked to deliver the keynote address today for what has become one of the entertainment community's most prestigious events. It is no secret, of course, that it's not all that difficult to get a writer to give an address. Scratch any writer, and you'll find a talker. It works out fine. Scratch us often enough and we don't have to do any writing at all.

Complimented though I was, I accepted with some trepidation. Keynote speakers who try to rise to the occasion often risk the danger of rising just that little too far, sometimes going right over the top. I refer you to Patrick Buchanan's memorable speech to the Republican Convention, in which, among other things, he declared this country to be in a holy war—a speech which someone brilliantly described as being much better in the original German.

Happily, today's gathering is not a convention, but rather a celebration. A celebration of the achievements of this year's Humanitas selection of the talented men and women whose works best typify the Humanitas ideals. A public acknowledgement of those writers who have been able to tiptoe through the minefield of commercially driven considerations and successfully avoided the hazards established by the keepers of the flame, our creatively cautious overlords, so that they might share with audiences, which is now in the billions, those efforts that affirm the best aspects of their own — the audiences'—and the writers'—humanity.

So much of our TV fare treats us as though we were as small as our screens. So many films now start with the chase and then build to the excitement.

These Humanitas honorees have paid their audiences the ultimate compliment by respecting their intelligence, by understanding their needs and by sharing their insights and imagination. By imagination, I'm not referring to the creation of plots or of situations or of characters. I mean the sort of imagination that allows them to tap into the hearts of those people sitting out there in the dark. To tap into their fears and their hopes.

They can ask an audience to feel, because they can identify with those feelings. They ask them to care, because they care, too. And in creating their works, they do us all proud, reminding us what a life-enhancing, miraculous gift quality writing can be.

A gift all the more precious, given that altogether too much of the language currently employed in the visual arts has become debased and impoverished to such a degree, that audiences now have to be warned before the showing of a piece that they are in danger of hearing adult language—the term “adult” now used chiefly to connote material that is profane, rather than mature, and by definition possibly complex and thought provoking, placing the viewer in some peril of having portions of it stick to his or her ribs.

The excellence of our honorees' work does not surprise me. We have a tremendous pool of gifted, expressive people in films and Television, who are ready, willing, and at times, actually able and encouraged to apply their skills in an attempt to make some order out of what so often seems a world whose handles have fallen away.

Unfortunately, in reaching out for the greatest possible financial success with the mass audience, interpreting mixed signals of public piety and private prurience, the decision makers, capitalizing on that ambivalence, spend far too much time in the shallow end of the pool, encouraging a steady, relentless flow of escapist entertainment—subsidized, commercialized denial. The more pervasive, the more inescapable escapist fare becomes, the more we are apt to forget just what it is we're trying to escape. The more we are in danger of putting off finding the solutions to whatever it is we're working so hard to pretend doesn't exist.

What is so impressive about the body of work we salute here today is that it was forged in an environment that is the schizoid setting for the ongoing, never-ending conflict between decency and dollars. The very same networks and cable companies, along with the motion picture studios who brought us the best of our finalists' efforts, are also the purveyors of some of the worst others are only too willing to supply.

Certainly not all artists are the same. We are as different as people as we are as talents. Some kids can't stop playing with matches. Others want to grow up to become firefighters.

There is, of course, the matter of earning a living. One way to help make ends meet is to supply happy endings on demand, regardless of their appropriateness. While that may benefit the supplier, it leaves frustrated, misguided millions wondering who are all those Martians, parading around as human beings who can arrive at such timely, tidy resolutions to the problems that ordinary mortals have such a difficult time struggling with?

Commercial interests view the audience as numbers. Numbers translate into consumerism. Consumerism's greatest aid is voyeurism. Those two elements have created untold wealth for those who have combined technology with titillation.

Commercial interests have an unfortunate, if not altogether disastrous habit of hijacking progress.

The brothers Lumiere did not pioneer the motion picture camera so that we might one day see two lovers of Mt. Rushmore proportions giving us sex education demonstrations up on a giant screen.

Alexander Graham Bell did not invent the telephone so that high school kids could squander their unearned wealth on ATT-T&A.

And the information highway wasn't really meant to be a shopping channel for open raincoat commercials.

Humanitas' recognition of those whose aspirations do not for one moment consider the bottom line in their choice of subject and treatment should encourage all of us to constantly prod our patrons; to challenge the people in charge of the green light switches to learn to trust the public's capacity for meaningful material: to respect the viewer and the ticket buyer as more than merely just so many ratings points or box office receipts; to never let the powers-that-be forget that, in addition to their economic

responsibilities, they are beholden to a larger family, as well, one to which we all belong, and as members, they must contribute to that family's social and spiritual nourishment.

Conventional wisdom used to hold that audiences had the tastes and understanding of 12 year olds. The real 12 year olds out there today are the six year olds. Our audience is smarter than it has ever been. And if that is too rosy an assumption, there has never been a better learning tool than the one member of the family to which everyone in the household pays attention—the Television set.

My wife and I played hosts to our kids two days ago, on the Fourth. Our kids and their kids. As darkness fell, and the briquettes started to cool, my granddaughter, Nina, who will be four tomorrow, asked me to tell her a story. Now, over the years, with five children and five grandchildren, I can tell you I have made Mother Goose a ton of money in residuals—that, plus a lifetime of rewriting, always prompts me to try putting a different spin on the stories they love to hear over and over. And over.

So, I started to tell her about a house in the woods that belonged to a Papa Bear, a Mama Bear, and a Baby Pig. She did a four year old's take and looked at me oddly.

I said, "You know that story, don't you? The one where they go off for awhile and Snow White steals into their house?"

She took an even longer look at me, and then she said: "Grandpa, you're making me nervous."

Let us further resolve today to make those who commission our work nervous, as well. Make them nervous by demonstrating our desire to employ not only our craft, but our concern and our compassion, as well. That to constantly compartmentalize, to leave our hearts and convictions in the parking lot, is a two-way disservice. Three, when we include the audience.

Daily, hourly, from the oldest and hardest of us to the youngest, and the most impressionable, we are bombarded by acts of cruelty and barbarism committed in what has become routine fashion by anonymous strangers and all-too identifiable family members.

The psychic and physical carnage, on a global and a neighborhood level, instills in all too many of us a feeling of helplessness, of being in constant danger of serving as cannon fodder, all potential victims, just waiting our turn to be transformed into a statistic.

On the matter of statistics, we are distracted constantly by the tens of millions this motion picture has grossed, or that that performer is about to be paid. I've got some new zeroes for all the number buffs. It is estimated that at the close of the 20th century, 100 million people will have died in wars.

Facts such as that, multiplied by the never-ending assault on our senses and our longing for a sense of safety, our despair over the decline of decency led me to write a piece recently about the near impossibility of art competing with what has become, a least for me, the near-surreal quality of real life. Shortly after it was published, I received the following words from the gifted husband and wife writing team of Jerry Leichtling and Arlene Sarner.

"Of course, life supersedes fiction," they wrote. "It dwarfs the imagination and tramples on the spirit. No contest there. But in order not to be discouraged, it is the writer's task to make the incomprehensible personally coherent these days, to a power cubed by the media. Filtering and distilling and alchemizing, turning dross into profitable dross and occasionally into moral gold is what we are here for."

The Humanitas Prize exists “to encourage, stimulate and sustain the nation’s writers in their humanizing task, and to give them the recognition they deserve.”

It is a privilege for me to be able to extend our congratulations to the finalists for that prize, which symbolizes that well-earned and fitting recognition.

And to tell you how grateful we are for all the moral gold you’ve provided us.