

Denis Dutton, 9 February 1944 – 28 December 2010 - 3 Quarks Daily

3quarksdaily (<https://3quarksdaily.com/3quarksdaily/2010/12/denis-dutton-9-february-1944-28-december-2010.html>) · by S. Abbas Raza



(<https://3quarksdaily.com/.a/6a00d8341c562c53ef0147e11435f7970b-popup>) I am saddened to report that I just received an email from Sonia Dutton, Denis's daughter, informing me that her beloved father has died. Denis had been battling prostate cancer for some time. He was 66 years old. For those of you who are not familiar with Denis's work, I will simply quote from his Wikipedia entry:

Denis Dutton was an academic, web entrepreneur and libertarian media commentator/activist. He was a professor of philosophy at the University of Canterbury (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University_of_Canterbury) in Christchurch (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christchurch>), New Zealand (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Zealand). He was also a co-founder and co-editor of the websites Arts & Letters Daily (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arts_%26_Letters_Daily), ClimateDebateDaily.com and cybereditions.com.

Dutton was from Los Angeles (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Los_Angeles), California (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/California>) and was educated at the University of California, Santa Barbara (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University_of_California,_Santa_Barbara). He taught at several US universities before emigrating to New Zealand: the University of California, Santa Barbara and the University of Michigan–Dearborn (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University_of_Michigan%E2%80%93Dearborn). From 2008 to 2010 he was the acting head of the Philosophy school at Canterbury.

He was one of the founding members of New Zealand Skeptics (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Zealand_Skeptics).

Arts & Letters Daily, of which Denis was the founder and longtime editor, was one of the main inspirations for my starting *3 Quarks Daily*. Indeed, the “Daily” in our own name comes in imitation of Denis's site, which had set the gold standard that we have aspired to match in our own curating of slightly different intellectual content on the web. Despite the fact that we were competitors of sorts, Denis was kind and supportive to me personally, and added 3QD to the “favorite websites” section of A & L Daily within weeks after I had started this site in 2004 (and we retain that honor to this day).

Over the years, Denis and I corresponded frequently about various subjects, including the Dutton School which he started in India (my mother started a school in Pakistan, so this was a common interest), his academic work, and, of course, our websites. He once called 3QD “a brilliant web resource and a terrific accomplishment,” which gave me quite a thrill. We often linked to his work and reviews of his work here at 3QD, and also engaged his work more directly, such as when my nephew Asad Raza wrote a critical review (<https://3quarksdaily.com/3quarksdaily/2009/03/on-the-art-instinct-a-letter-to-denis-dutton.html>) of his book *The Art Instinct* (<http://theartinstinct.com/>), and I defended Denis in the comments section. In his writing and thinking, Denis was inventively provocative, erudite, and always forward-looking. In addition to A & L Daily and the other similar websites which he started, I always enjoyed looking at his personal website (<http://www.denisdutton.com/>) which often contained great gems of reading material.

One of the many instantiations of his sharp sense of humor was the Bad Writing Contest that he started while editor of *Philosophy and Literature*, a journal put out by Johns Hopkins University Press since 1977. I quote Wikipedia again:

In 1998, the contest awarded first place to University of California-Berkeley Professor Judith Butler (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Judith_Butler), for a sentence which appeared in the journal *diacritics*:

The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power.

Dutton said, “To ask what this means is to miss the point. This sentence beats readers into submission and instructs them that they are in the presence of a great and deep mind. Actual communication has nothing to do with it.” Butler challenged the charges of academic pedantry and obscurantism in the pages of the *New York Times* and the affair briefly became a *cause célèbre* in the world of academic theorists.

Denis also clearly understood that to run a successful website devoted to curating intellectual content on the web, one must first marry a woman named Margit. That he understood this and acted upon it before I did gave him a headstart and left me trying to catch up! (In other words, by sheer coincidence, we both married women with the not-exactly-common name Margit.)

On behalf of everyone at *3 Quarks Daily* I extend my deepest sympathies to Margit, Sonia, and Ben.