

Anarchist Writers Use Fiction to Create Real Possibilities

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a review of

Mythmakers & Lawbreakers: Anarchist Writers on Fiction, edited by Margaret Killjoy, AK Press, 2009, \$12

Radicals these days tend to fall into a few different camps, and one of the most important splits is between the academics and the non-academics.

If you've got one radical leftist who is a graduate student in philosophy, for example, and another one who works, say as a counselor for the mentally ill, the two will probably agree on most things. But the graduate student is likely to fall back on theorists like Foucault, Deleuze, Adorno, and others to explain her views, while the counselor falls back on...who?

Not an easy question. Just to be clear. I'm not talking about where radicals go for facts or journalistic accounts of capitalism's social and ecological ravages.

Both groups will probably read some of the same nonfiction books for that. What I'm talking about is where we go for descriptions of deeper questions.

What are the fundamental aspects of our humanity, and how are they manifesting in this moment? What experiences provide meaning to life? What forms of resistance are most effective and exciting? How should the radical balance her love of life with her hatred of capitalism?

Mythmakers and Lawbreakers is a new collection of interviews with radical fiction writers, conducted and edited by Margaret Killjoy, a fiction author herself and editor of *Steampunk* magazine. An interesting thread that emerges from this book is that many nonacademic radicals may be turning to fiction to explore some of these questions, which their more theoretical comrades would generally explore through theory.

Not that the two forms of writing address the same exact questions; no fictional text is going to pursue Heidegger's critique of Descartes at length. But then, most nonacademic radicals don't care about that, anyway. They are more interested in questions of pleasure (how do we enjoy life under capitalism), strategics (how do we work to destroy capitalism), and organizing (how do we bring fresh blood into radical movements), just to name a few.

This book argues powerfully that radical fiction is home to lively and accessible debates that address each of these questions, as well as many more. Take the question of pleasure. Many of the fourteen writers interviewed here acknowledge the pain of existence under the abusive rule of global capitalism, and the converse pleasure of creating fantasy worlds more to our liking.

In one of the book's strangest and most surprising interviews, Mexican novelist, Octavio Buenaventura, says this well. "When I fall into the repetitiveness of my supposedly radical lifestyle," he says, "spinning fantasies is the only way I can feel content with a life spent largely in stasis."

But it's not just spinning fantasies of a post-revolutionary society (the setting of Buenaventura's novella *Ever and Anon*). It's also in the telling and the experience of pleasure in someone else's eyes as they read or listen. "If one person I love likes what I create, I am happy," he says.

Other writers address this question differently. Some find pleasure in fantasy and about half of the writers gathered here publish in the science-fiction or fantasy genres, including masters such as Michael Moorcock, Alan Moore, and Ursula K. Le Guin. Others get off on realism of the grittiest sort.

Zinester and graphic novelist Cristy Road tells Killjoy she likes to “write about things the way they are,” and offers as an example, “being in love with someone who is kind of an asshole. Everyone has been in love with someone who is kind of an asshole”.

Whether they dig on representing a different world from the one we have, or in representing what we’ve got in a style that shows it in a new light, one point of agreement the writers assembled here share is that stories are a powerful resource that radical movements need. This consensus emerges from a deeper vision among these authors of the existing world, that barren and ravaged world of capitalism and the police state, as propped up by an invisible support structure of statist fantasy. “These are the fantasies that tell us it’s good to obey those above us in the hierarchy, that the system cares about us and deserves our support, that money is equivalent to food and land and labor.

In order to create an alternative world, then, it’s essential to create a subversive alternative scaffolding of images, myths, and heroes, upon which we can build a new consensus reality that honors the earth and all living creatures, including ourselves. In the words of Starhawk, who appears as fabulously thoughtful and intelligent in her interview here, fiction “can show you those different possibilities and potentials, at much less cost than actually going there and making those choices yourself to see how they play out.”

You might think these ideas sound like a cue for writers to begin cranking out propaganda, novels in which the dashing and crusty, clad in ratty black jeans and balaclavas, rise up united and smash the state! But that’s not what this book is about. Happily, the writers are mostly allergic to propaganda. They don’t want to shove their ideology down your throat, but get you to question all ideology.

“How do you write a book that simultaneously calls itself and all other books into question,” asks an anonymous representative of Crimethinc, “in such a way that it has a dynamic effect on the readership rather than persuading people to your opinion?” Starhawk builds on this idea, criticizing activists who make decisions based not on experience and strategic brainwork, but “because they think that’s the way you should do things if you’re really an anarchist.” In other words, they do it because of ideology they’ve read somewhere.

That’s not to say that just any message will do. Obviously, the point of the game here is to change our civilization at the deepest possible level. “Any book that doesn’t start from the fact that this culture is killing the planet and works to resolve that is unforgivable,” Derrick Jensen says. That’s right; Jensen, best known for his nonfiction books about ecological devastation, is also a fiction writer with two recently published novels to his credit.

The message of this book isn’t that activists should retreat to the hills and start writing short stories. Many of the writers interviewed here do not just write, but also do other forms of organizing. At the same time, the book is a plea for radicals who may see fiction as useless or frivolous to embrace the imagination and to be welcoming toward radicals who may lack the social skills for organizing but who want to contribute as artists.

In closing, I’ll mention that Killjoy herself makes a charming and affable guide through this world of scribbling agitators. She’s written short introductions to each interview, and it made me smile to learn that she “hitchhiked to California” to interview Derrick Jensen, for example. The book definitely has one foot in traveler culture, but takes a most colorful and creative point of view on it.

The book also helped me ID certain popular writers who I’d never known were anarchists; I’m looking forward to digging deeper into their work.



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