

A Brief History of Anarchist Fiction

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People sometimes inquire what form of government is most suitable for an artist to live under. To this question there is only one answer. The form of government that is most suitable to the artist is no government at all

– Oscar Wilde

I used to see my interests in anarchism and fiction as wholly separate things, because I didn't know there was any overlap. None of my activist friends were writing stories—at least that they told me about—and I hadn't yet realized how rich the history of anarchist fiction is. But there are anarchists, philosophical and active alike, in mainstream fiction—it's just that their politics are rarely shown to the world. There are writers among the activists, but their writing is rarely distributed. And there is a remarkable, broad history of multilingual anarchist culture from around the world, although most of it is hidden by obscurity or time.

The first time I spoke about anarchism and fiction was at the Baltimore book festival a few years back. In the hour leading up to the talk, I was really nervous—I knew I would be speaking to an audience that had little understanding of anarchism—so I paced around the tents of the festival, trying to figure out how to introduce the topic. And then I saw a hand-painted sign: “The top 100 English-language novels of the 20th century,” as compiled by Modern Library. Three of the top five novels were written by people involved in anarchist politics (James Joyce and Aldous Huxley), as were a total of eight novels on the list (by Anthony Burgess, Henry Miller, and Kurt Vonnegut). And that isn't including the socialists who made the list, like Jack London, nor the two novels by George Orwell, who survived being shot in the neck fighting fascists in the Spanish Civil War.

When I'd read Huxley in school, I wasn't taught what he meant when he said that what the world needed was radical decentralization of a “Kropotkinesque and cooperative” sort in the introduction to the 1946 edition of *Brave New World*. (Nor, to my knowledge, was that introduction kept in the modern editions furnished to us students.)

Without even knowing it, you've read anarchist fiction. There are “literary” greats like Leo Tolstoy (“The Anarchists are right in everything...They are mistaken only in thinking that Anarchy can be instituted by revolution.” [“On Anarchy,” 1900]), Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Henry Miller (“[An anarchist] is exactly what I am. Have been all my life.” [Conversations With Henry Miller, 1994]), Dambudzo Marechera (“If you are a writer for a specific nation or a specific race, then fuck you.”), Ba Jin, Carolyn Chute, J.M. Coetzee (“What is wrong with politics is power itself.” [Diary of a Bad Year, 2007]), Jorge Luis Borges, and William Blake, and other popular fiction authors like Alan Moore, Ursula K. Le Guin, Michael Moorcock, Robert Shea, Norman Spinrad, B. Traven, Kurt Vonnegut, Ethel Mannin, and Edward Abbey.

Of course, my research has been necessarily limited by geographic and language barriers and these lists are quite English-language- and American-centric. But one thing I found consistently is that, around the world, fiction has been part of our movement and anarchists have been part of the literary history. In 1920s and 1930s Spain, there were two anarchist fiction periodicals, *La Novela Ideal* and *La Novela Libre*, which had print runs of 50,000 and

included some of the most important writers of those decades. Publication of the magazines continued into the Spanish Civil War and only ended when Franco took control of the country.

Plenty of widely read authors who didn't identify explicitly as anarchists have had close ties and sympathies to our cause. William Burroughs wrote *Cities of the Red Night*, a homoerotic anarchist novel. Albert Camus wrote extensively for anarchist papers and used his literary clout to help anarchist prisoners. Franz Kafka participated in anarchist meetings and demonstrations in Prague and helped found an anarchist journal. One of Philip K. Dick's first novels was an anarchist story, "The Last of the Masters." George Bernard Shaw, the playwright and novelist, flirted with anarchism early in life before settling as a social democrat and he included sympathetic anarchists in his work and was published by anarchist papers. Frank Herbert was intensely critical of government and law and lived on a sustainable land project. Upton Sinclair wrote the book *Boston* to defend anarchist prisoners Sacco and Vanzetti. JRR Tolkien wrote his son to say "My political opinions lean more and more to Anarchy (philosophically understood, meaning abolition of control not whiskered men with bombs)."

Historically, a number of anarchist activists, theorists, and militants have been fiction authors: Voltairine De-Cleyre, Federica Montseny, Fredy Perlman, Eugene Nelson, Joseph Dejacque, Eduard Pons Prades, William Godwin, Louise Michel, and Antonio Penichet all wrote fiction in addition to theory, or in addition to taking arms against fascism and the state.

But obviously, anarchist fiction isn't limited to famous people, and anarchist culture is involved in trying to break down hierarchies wherever they are found. I uncovered dozens of DIY anarchist authors *La Novela Ideal*, No. 482 in my research who put out zines and books, run small publishers, and generally try to keep storytelling alive in anarchism—because it's always been a part of our movement.

One problem that plagues anarchist fiction, however, is a problem that plagues a lot of activist fiction. Being able to tell a compelling story and having a solid, radical critique are two different skillsets, and the best fiction is written by those rare few who have developed both. As my friend puts it, politics is no excuse for bad art. There are plenty of didactic novels that try to use fiction to describe anarchist society but fall flat as writing or lack nuance and critique. My favorite of these, personally, is Graham Purchase's *My Journey With Aristotle To The Anarchist Utopia*: the society described is fascinating and well-thought out, but the prose is lackluster and the plot and characters are thin. In the other direction, there are novels written by professional writers that describe our movements and cultures that miss rather important points of our critique, paints us as villains, or just fail to portray us accurately. The most famous book of anarchist-as-mad-bomber slander is probably Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, which is a shame because Conrad's father was a Polish political radical with ties to Bakunin.

Very few exceptional anarchist novels exist, or at least are widely distributed. By far the most well-known anarchist novel then, that passes both of these tests, is Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*. Other notable books to portray anarchist societies are Starhawk's *The Fifth Sacred Thing*, Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, PM's *Bolo'Bolo*, Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars Trilogy*, and M. Gilliland's *The Free*. Anarchists have made it in as sympathetic (though often misguided or idealized) characters in any number of books, such as Rick Dakan's *Geek Mafia: Black Hat Blues*, Cory Doctorow's *Someone Comes to Town, Someone Leaves Town*, Wu Ming's *54*, Grant Morrison's *The Invisibles*, and Thomas Pynchon's *Against the Day*.

I released a book in 2009 with AK Press entitled *Mythmakers & Lawbreakers: Anarchist Writers on Fiction* that features interviews with 14 anarchist fiction writers and that compiles biographies of every anarchist fiction writer I could track down, living and dead. After the book's release, I toured the US and Europe talking about anarchism and fiction, and I was often asked what my favorite anarchist fiction novel is. At first I didn't know what to answer, but eventually, I settled on Dennis Danver's *The Watch*. *The Watch*, arguably one of the best time travel books I've read, drops Peter Kropotkin into 1989 Richmond, Virginia and observes as he deals with anarcho-punks, precarious labor, and race relations. The book tells a low-key and beautiful story with compelling characters, yet introduces the reader to some of the most basic of anarchist political and philosophical concepts.

And that, I would argue, is the power of anarchist fiction. Again and again in the interviews I conducted, I heard that fiction is a great method to ask questions instead of offering blueprints, a way to make suggestions that aren't meant to be taken as codified law, a way to explore the potential effects of anarchism on people. And of course, anarchist fiction isn't limited to portrayals of the societies we envision or the struggles we undergo. What is useful about anarchists writing fiction is just the ability to normalize our world views: non-hierarchy, anti-authoritarianism,

egalitarianism, etc. We can normalize princesses that not only don't need saving but have no interest in power, we can normalize stories told from the working class's point of view, and we can normalize people who are usually "othered" by society and fiction.

Researching the intersection of anarchism and fiction has been a fascinating rabbit hole. I started with *The Dispossessed* and Alan Moore's *V for Vendetta* but ended up finding so much more, and it seems every literary rock I overturn reveals even more anarchy. I used to think the current situation was a bleak landscape populated only by a handful of brave zinesters. I was depressed: the 19th century had its utopian novels, the early 20th century had working-class fiction, the 60s was full of beautiful wingnut shit, and the 70s saw feminist science fiction go mainstream and bring its anti-authoritarian, pro-egalitarian politics with it. But, and perhaps this is only because I'm looking more closely, it feels like we're going through a resurgence.

AK Press has returned to publishing new fiction, and PM Press, although not an anarchist publisher, has been publishing some anarchist fiction as well. CrimethInc. has blurred the lines between fiction and non-fiction as well as venturing into children's stories directly. Some contemporary anarchist fiction writers worth looking into are Kristyn Dunnion, Jim Munroe, Fly, Dennis Cooper, Cristy C. Road, The Catastrophone Orchestra, Gabriel Boyer, Rick Dakan, Octavio Buenaventura, Carissa van den Berk Clark, Derrick Jensen, Mattias Elftorp, James Kelman, Gabriel Kuhn, Peter Gelderloos, and Lewis Shiner.

Some friends and I have started a worker-run genre fiction publishing collective, Combustion Books. Based out of New York City, we're interested in getting radical ideas into genre fiction culture and breaking the mold of what it means to be an anarchist publisher.

In my travels I've been approached by more and more people who tell me they've been writing for years, handed books and zines and urls, and I've been amazed by the quality of some of it. We always sell ourselves short, but we as anarchists are fully capable of presenting useful and well-crafted culture to this world.

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