

Watching the Clock

Waiting to get back to living

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2022

a review of

The Lady Anarchist Café: Poems and Stories by Lorraine Schein. Autonomedia, 2022

Lorraine Schein, a friend of long-standing, has just published her latest book, *The Lady Anarchist Café: Poems and Stories*.

This writer has toiled for years within stultifying bureaucratic confines of the workaday world while maintaining sharp anarchist perspectives in her creative endeavors.

The U.S. ruling class continually carries out assaults on the poor, workers, ethnic minorities, female and LGBTQ people—cutting benefits, wages, rights, health care and education. At the same time, the big corporations, such as Walmart and Amazon, and big moneybags like Starbucks' CEO Howard Schultz, pour vast resources into thwarting unionization.

And, this is not directed only at their bottom-level drones, but all up the line. Amazon treats middle management with, as Peter Fleming explains in *The Death of Homo Economicus*, “a highly individualized ‘rank and yank’ performance review where employees were regularly reviewed, stack ranked, and the worst performers fired.”

All this is depressing, and might make one imagine office workers are thoroughly cowed, but *The Lady Anarchist Café* throws a different light on this situation.

Schein had been a long-time friend of Peter Lamborn Wilson, and with him was one of the founders of the Unbearables, a New York City-based literary group, whose mission was to carry out impish attacks on the commodification of literature in the tradition of the Fifth Estate's phony editions of Detroit mainstream news papers or the actions of the Chicago Surrealists.

In 1995, several anarchists, including Schein and myself, were protesting the high-ticket-price of New York University's Beat Generation Conference marking 50 years since Allen Ginsberg, and William Burroughs met on a rainy street corner in Manhattan and launched their literary movement. While, for top dollar, NYU offered a Greenwich Village tour of Kerouac's haunts, across the street we recruited for an alternative tour of the sites of all the infoshops and anarchist switchboards (we alleged) Kerouac frequented.

We gathered quite a crowd of curious conference attendees to follow us. Halfway through, Lorraine climbed on top of a post office box and read a poem about the Beats and anarchism.

Over the years, Schein, like many NYC writers, made a living in pick-up, temp jobs in commercial publishing. Her writing suggests that while corporate disempowerment campaigns may have, to a degree, kept industry workers from protesting, they have not cowed their minds.

As this book illustrates, slogging through the corporate trenches, assailed by on-the-job propaganda, Schein has husbanded her anarchist flame, always watching the clock, so that after hours she can get back to the streets and cafes where she and her comrades work for a better world.

It is this double life that gives her such a sarcastic perspective on the work world. She writes:

“My friends, those fuck-ups

who can't hold jobs for long
(much less contribute to the global economy)
are right-sizing their brains
to fit the tiny corporate craniums of tomorrow"

But perhaps, she hints, you don't need to adjust your brains; the workplace does it for you. In a prose poem, she illustrates:

"She worked in a comic book factory for one of the major manufacturers of childhood dreams...While changing the name of a supervillain one afternoon, she hadn't looked up to see the edges of the room stiffen into lines, then blacken and triangulate, enclosing her in a panel."

A slacker like her is most in the pink when she gets a pink slip and can collect unemployment. She puts it like this:

"Fired from my day job...Watching you scorn or ignore me / as you hustle past, / busy as small conflagrations. / But I am busy too—/ slipping all knots, as I liquefy, / transforming into water."

While the poetry in this volume pours scorn on the corporate mindset and our current living conditions, her stories speak more of the after workday when, usually in terms of speculative fiction, her characters plot subversion.

In one story in a nightclub, the protagonist queries a revolutionary,

"What is the Temporal Liberation Movement? Sandra asked.

"It's a guerrilla effort to abolish time,' Frederick said in a low voice, 'to gain true control of its false servitude to us."

At first glance, Frederick's remark suggests the conservatives' complaint that radicals are hopelessly unrealistic. "Abolish time. Oh, come on," one might say.

But wait, this is sci fi. And wait again, in the story, the anarchists have invented a time machine—they go into the past to visit with Emma Goldman—so in this context Frederick's complaints against time have merit.

Schein's stories present a topsy-turvy world, one in which creating a new society seems almost commonplace. In another story, in another bar, this time the Lady Anarchist Café, the protagonist is buttonholed by a mysterious woman.

"Are you interested in the planet Venus?" she asked, glancing at me sharply from under her brim, then looking away.

"Yes, as interested as anyone here," I replied, taking a sip of my sizzling drink, stirring the popping foam with a swizzle stick shaped like a bomb's wick. "Why do you ask?"

"I am a recruiter for a colony of women soon to be established there. We are looking for settlers, those unsatisfied with what was done on the moon."

In pieces like this, Schein is both humorous and hopeful-eyed. Not to say she doesn't have a darker side visible in a few places, like the sober story "The Edifice." The building of the story's title is a combined reformatory/ school/ church, "patrolled by our teacher-clergy, ever vigilant in their caps and gowns, swinging their taser-bludgeons." The storyteller is anonymous; has been made anonymous. "I have been here so long I have forgotten how I got here and if I had a name."

She is something like the boy soldier in barracks/school/prison in the short story "Strike Anywhere," in Cara Hoffman's recent, powerful collection, *Ruin*.

In that story, the hero has come to accept as normal his rough, regimented life. In Schein's piece, the hero believes the lies she's been spoon-fed. Hearing of a possibility of escape, she rejects it, thinking, "How would I live outside the barracks? Only the Edifice can keep us safe."

It's a grim parable of existence in a total institution though one inflected by Schein's humor, here a gallows humor. When the narrator first enters the facility, she is questioned.

"How do you feel about crucifixion and algebra?"

"I'm not sure-I guess it depends on the circumstances. I never was good at math, but with an incentive like that, I'm sure I can change."

The Lady Anarchist Café mixes sardonic poems about the insanity and inanity of corporate office work with fetching sci fi stories of an escape to a (usually) more pleasurable future.

It is surely hopeful that in our society, while the owners tighten the screws year by year, Schein testifies that many office workers under their happy faces conceal undying faith in the disappearance of this onerous, life-denying corporate world and the advent of a society living under a black flag, snapping in the wind.

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