

MYTHMAKERS & LAWBREAKERS

anarchist writers on fiction

part ten

MICHAEL MOORCOCK

edited by
Margaret Killjoy

This zine is an excerpt from the book *Mythmakers & Lawbreakers*, published in 2009 by AK Press. The book consists of a series of interviews with various anarchist fiction writers, as well as extensive appendices with biographies and reading lists of anarchist writers. We are making the work available in zine format, in the spirit of creative commons, but are of course indebted to AK Press for publishing the book in the first place.

The rest of the book can be downloaded in zine form from us at www.tangledwilderness.org or bought from AK Press at www.akpress.org

Mythmakers and Lawbreakers: Anarchist Writers on Fiction
Edited by Margaret Killjoy, 2009

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MICHAEL MOORCOCK

I feel like it's safe to say that Michael Moorcock has written more books than the rest of the authors I interviewed for this project combined. An exact number is actually hard to come by, but I counted 108 novels, novellas, and graphic novels on one bibliography. And more than a few of these books explore explicitly anarchist themes. I'd read some of his sword and sorcery novels before, but I picked up the Nomad In The Time Streams series a few years back and read a parable about black power and a story about Makhno and Stalin fighting side-by-side (and of course, against one another). Airships and anarchists; you really can't go wrong. Moorcock has been hugely influential on modern society, albeit most of that has been secondhand. My personal favorite revelation is that he created the chaos symbol that so many of my friends have tattooed.

I'd spoken to Michael briefly a few years back for the first issue of SteamPunk Magazine, and it was a pleasure to get to pick his brain again, this time about his anarchism, about what he's accomplished, and how angry he is with the people who have watered-down his ideas.

Margaret: *You once described Nestor Makhno as "a martyr to a cause that can never be lost but which the world may never properly understand." Referring, of*

course, to anarchism... you've stated yourself at various points in your life as an anarchist, and I was wondering if you could tell us about what that means to you?

Michael: I'm an anarchist and a pragmatist. My moral/philosophical position is that of an anarchist. This makes it very easy for me to make a decision from what you might call a Kropotkinist point of view. There's been so little good experience of anarchists running big cities that I'd love to see the experiment made. So far anarchism has only apparently worked well in rural environments.

This was certainly true of Makhno. I like him because he stuck, as far as we can tell, rigorously to his anarchist principles.

Margaret: *What I've set out to explore with this project is what it means to be both an anarchist and a fiction writer. How do you think the two relate, at least in your life?*

Michael: My books frequently deal with aristocratic heroes, gods and so forth. All of them end on a note which often states quite baldly that one should serve neither gods nor masters but become one's own master. This is a constant theme throughout all my fiction. Philosophically I, together with my protagonists (where I identify with them) seek to find a balance between Law and Chaos. Frequently my characters achieve that balance by refusing to serve anything but their own consciences. The books, of course, are written on many levels and I'm talking mostly about what you might call my romances or "entertainments"—popular fiction addressing, I hope, intelligent people who have reasonably open minds. I find such readers are well represented on my website. Several are committed anarchists.

Margaret: *And how did you get into anarchism personally?*

Michael: Being around anarchists. Listening to old guys at the Malatesta Club talking about the Spanish Civil War. Reading. I've been attracted to anarchist ideas since I was 17. But it took me a while to become a sophisticated political thinker, thanks mostly to reading Kropotkin.

Margaret: *You've been known to incorporate historical anarchists into your novels, particularly Nestor Makhno. Aside from making your novels that much more engaging to those of us familiar with him, what purposes led you to this?*

Michael: I like to introduce as many readers as possible to my heroes. Many readers have written to me and told me they had never heard of Makhno, Bakunin, Kropotkin, and the rest and I've been able to point them to, say, [George] Woodcock's *Anarchism* [an introduction to anarchist history].

Margaret: *I'm excited to include you in this project, by the way. One of the first things I did when I started this project was to re-read "Starship Stormtroopers," [Michael Moorcock's 1978 essay about political science fiction in general and Robert Heinlein in specific] which I feel like was one of the first things to draw the connections between anti-authoritarianism and science fiction. How do you think things have changed since you wrote that?*

Michael: Heinlein, like a lot of Americans, was a right libertarian. I have something in common with right libertarians but of course I have much more in common with left libertarians!

I believe that many of these libertarians are essentially authoritarians, though I respect those who see the Constitution as the law to live by. This, of course, allows them to carry massive firepower. My argument against this is that if you don't own a nuke, you don't have equal firepower with a potentially repressive government. I like the ending of Alfred Bester's (libertarian) *Tiger, Tiger!* or *The Stars My Destination* [the book was published under both names at various points], in which the power to destroy the universe is put into the hands of every individual. A great ideal but, of course, it doesn't allow for the suicidal psychopath who'd quite happily destroy himself and everyone else. I'm not sure I like the thought of that psychopath being able to destroy the world, but I like the underlying moral idea of everyone being responsible for the existence of the world. I don't think we had thought about suicide bombers of a religious persuasion when I wrote that piece!

Margaret: *What do you think you have accomplished, or could hope to accomplish, in the social or political sphere, with your fiction, or as a fiction writer?*

Michael: I've introduced a lot of readers to anarchism and I've helped, according to their letters, a lot more think for themselves. The whole point of my fiction is to allow readers to decide for themselves their own moral attitudes. The Jerry Cornelius stories, for instance, are pure anarchism in their refusal to "guide" the reader in any direction. I try to set out the material and let them decide what they think. I think I've encouraged readers to do that and several writers have been influenced by me to try the same sort of techniques.

Margaret: *I am fascinated by the influence you've had on our culture. For example, a lot of your concepts, from the Law vs. Chaos dichotomy to potions of speed, were adopted into the very beginning of Dungeons & Dragons, which in turn has influenced an ever-growing number of fantasy games. Of course, sometimes it seems that people just emulate the surface of things and miss a lot of the underlying philosophy. How do you feel about that?*

Michael: I'm disappointed when people pick up on the ideas superficially. My theory of the multiverse, where I coined the term (unconscious of William

James coining it to explain multiple ways of thinking/being) wasn't just a handy way for explaining why Superman stories were contradictory. The book—my first SF book—described a complex idea which, I'm glad to say, has been taken up by theoretical physicists rather more profoundly than by most comics and other popular fiction/drama. I'm irritated when people use my images/ideas/characters to plunge the genre straight back into all the crap I was trying to confront. My books are fundamentally about fantasy and how it's used, what it does. The underlying message is always—confront reality. If these tools (the ones I've created or adapted) are useful to you in order to do that, so much the better. However, when people build on my ideas or are inspired by them to do their own original work, I celebrate. Alan Moore, for instance, gives me credit but is himself an enormously influential and original writer. That makes me proud and makes me want to publicize such work whenever I come across it, just as I like it when people make use of Jerry Cornelius [Moorock's repeating character] to tell their own stories, make their own points. People who realize, as M. John Harrison pointed out, that Jerry is as much a technique as he is a character.

What also depresses me, incidentally, is when books like *Mother London* or the Pyat books are perceived as fantasy. They are not. I don't see the Cornelius books in that way, either. They were not originally seen like this by critics or the public. I want people to understand that these books are confrontational, about reality. They're not escapist fantasy. I get particularly pissed off by people describing the Pyat books as "alternate realities." They are about real events, real people, real issues, about this world and our responsibility for it. That the narrator fantasies about his lack of responsibility is one of the issues. Similarly, I have written sophisticated narratives, like the Blood trilogy, which describe the philosophical (if you like) structure of what I call Law and Chaos.

I'm frankly contemptuous of people who trivialize my ideas when they rip them off.

Margaret: *One of the things that I've observed among a lot of anarchist writers (and other interesting writers too, of course) is the idea of the anti-hero, something which really turns most genre fiction on its head. I like how, as you mentioned, this leaves the reader without an external moral compass. Care to elaborate?*

Michael: I'm concerned with helping, I hope, the reader determine their own moral compass.

The anti-hero is traditionally one who stands against all received morality, all received opinion. He confronts society and refuses its unexamined assumptions. This is why I find myself at odds with certain middle-class writers, no matter how good. Like, for instance the late John Updike. I remember him writing a phrase that went, "You know how girls smell in autumn..." Assuming

that everyone shares certain perceptions. Well, I don't bloody know how girls smell in autumn and I don't know what it's like to grow up in a conventional middle-class environment like Iain McEwan or even Martin Amis. I have almost nothing in common with those people. I have more in common with the writers Iain Sinclair also celebrates, like Jack Trevor Story or Gerald Kersh, who are "forgotten" by the literary world—marginalized at least—precisely because they don't know how girls smell in autumn, either.

Margaret: *You've written a fair amount of criticism of the fantasy genre, and never shied away from understanding the way an author's politics influence their fiction. Have you noticed any current trends, politically or philosophically speaking, in the genre?*

Michael: I read almost no fantasy, especially generic fantasy, so I can't really comment. Generic fiction almost by definition reflects—whatever it is—social fiction, historical fiction, thrillers, whatever—social norms and conventional ideas. Most fantasy and SF is vaguely liberal, some of it is disturbingly right wing, written by people who like the idea of slicing other people's heads off and so on. I was attracted to it originally because it wasn't a defined genre, there was very little of it and, like rock and roll, you could make something of your own out of it. If I was a young writer today, I'd have absolutely nothing to do with it. Of course there are going to be some good writers who put their own stamp on things or write essentially outside genre (Jonathan Carroll, Jeff Ford, Mike Harrison, Jeff VanderMeer spring to mind) and some of these have what I'd call an anarchist sensibility—Harrison in particular. I like how Ballard has carved himself an original, bloody-minded, socially critical form out of what was originally just outstandingly good generic SF. And Burroughs, of course, remains a great inspiration.

Margaret: *And a final question: I've heard that you worked to get John Norman's women-as-slaves Gor series kept out of the young-adult section of bookstores?*

Michael: I suggested that Smith's [a London newstand chain] put them on the top shelves along with the other stuff they thought should go up there. I'm not for censorship but I am for strategies which marginalize stuff that works to objectify women and suggests women enjoy being beaten. 🇺🇸

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—Michael Moorcock

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