

MYTHMAKERS & LAWBREAKERS

anarchist writers on fiction

part eleven

CARISSA VAN DEN BERK CLARK

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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CARISSA VAN DEN BERK CLARK

Carissa van den Berk Clark's book Yours For The Revolution was probably the first DIY-published novel I saw in an infoshop when I got into politics. It wasn't until years later that I discovered its sequel, May it Come Quickly Like a Shaft Sundering in the Dark.

I tracked her down for this project and it turns out she, by joy and by occupation, is an anarchist social worker. We spoke about how best to write earnestly, about the role of the artist and the anarchist in the greater social struggle, and about riotgrrl.

Margaret: *So you've published two novels, Yours for the Revolution, and its sequel May it Come Quickly Like a Shaft Sundering in the Dark. Both deal rather explicitly with squatters and freight trains and punks and gender politics and all of that. Although the setting is clearly fictional, it seems pretty clear that you are or were immersed in that counterculture...*

Carissa: I've been a part of movements for change, whether to resist war, stop racism, redistribute wealth and power, since I was 15 and I don't see myself

changing. I honestly hope I never do. I think this is important, for a number of reasons. One of the most important is that my fiction has anarchist values, which for me include social and economic equality. The other is that I think one should write what one knows, otherwise she or he has to rely on stereotypes. There's something very uncomfortable about writing in stereotypes and it's always felt ethically uncomfortable to me. This ethical dilemma has a strong influence on my writing and on the way I live my life.

Margaret: *I've read a fair amount of fiction about travel culture and/or anarchism and/or rebellion that is really clearly written by an outsider. And usually it ends up offending or annoying me, actually.*

Carissa: Right, it either offends you or it's just somehow not a very interesting story. It's very surface-y. There is a difference between a literary piece that really moves you and changes the way you think and a story that merely distracts you from day-to-day life.

Margaret: *A lot of those stories, the ones written by outsiders, just present us as stereotypes.*

Carissa: And they don't get into the personal relationships that exist, because unless you're in the middle of it, you don't really see people as people. You create these images of what you think they are... it's just one-dimensional.

Margaret: *So it seems like one of the reasons that we should be writing fiction is because people are going to mythologize us, since we live differently, so maybe it makes sense that we are the ones to present that.*

Carissa: I wasn't particularly worried about people mythologizing anarchists. I honestly never thought about it. I really just wanted to show that we have the potential to be like the Haymarket anarchists and all the massive political coalitions that came about alongside of them and that, if we do, we can get hurt. The book tries to show how governments actually hamper democracy rather than promote it. Anarchists today unfortunately isolate themselves pretty badly and they weren't portrayed that way in the novel.

Margaret: *For a long time, we anarchists have been talking about how, politically, we shouldn't be isolating ourselves. But it's interesting to me because, as a writer, it's very important to understand how so many different people work. The same skill applies to both actions.*

Carissa: Exactly, and I have seen how important it is for us anarchists to work more intimately with our communities. When I was writing *Yours for the Revo-*

lution and its sequel, I was much more involved in political protests and organizing demonstrations, and much of that work was done exclusively with other anarchist and activist types. When I started writing my third book, *Who's Esperanza?*, a bunch of us in St. Louis had gotten together and started a non-profit and basically used that non-profit to do a community land trust and bought a building and used it as a community space.

Two things were interesting about this. One, the non-profit organized using an anarchist model, which is kinda a new thing... no one was organizing non-profits on anarchist models, but why couldn't you? You can organize it however you want to, since it's not like you're doing it to make money. And then the second thing is because there were actually a couple of us anarchist social workers around, we came up with the radical social worker anarchist model. We focused on saying, "Look, this isn't just going to be a community of anarchists. We need to have people on the board who live in this neighborhood, we need to knock on all the doors and ask what people would like to see here." And that's precisely what happened.

An afterschool youth program was the result. And it was great because the way you get the community involved is by interacting with their children. When the kids were there, their parents showed up. And suddenly there were these amazing bridges being built between anarchist kids who usually only hung out around each other and these community groups that were suddenly becoming educated about different ways of resisting, of different organizing models. It was great to see that, and that's something that I see as becoming more and more important in terms of where the anarchist movement should go. We have more leverage than we think, in our small numbers, in the urban cities where we usually live. A lot of times we could do a lot more.

Margaret: *So you published your two books through a record label...*

Carissa: Through Bloodlink. Actually, I published one through Bloodlink. When I wrote *Yours for the Revolution*, and actually the other one was done at that time too, I didn't really want to spend much time shopping it around; I felt that it was kinda necessary that it come out right away, because it fit the politics of the time. When it was put out it was basically right after 9-11. If I'd had to shop it around for a year or two, the issues would still be relevant, but they'd kind of already be done.

We decided to cut the whole story into two books because of the cost. We could sell it for much cheaper, and it would give me more time to edit through the second part. It was nice also because the second part came out right after the Iraq war started. It worked really well as a sequel, and I got to change things along with current events. Since printing each one was cheaper, I could sell them for \$5, which was something I'd wanted to do so that anyone could get it. Books are so expensive, and it winds up that people read less because it just

costs so much more to get a book than get a movie. I also wanted the writing to carry the reader through the story almost like they were watching a movie. I wanted a book that people would stay up all night reading because they just couldn't sleep, wondering what would happen next.

The book that I'm in the process of writing, that I'm taking my time with, it's basically a take-off of Ayn Rand's novels, but it will teach the opposite story. It's based on *Atlas Shrugged*, about railroads, and it's basically about a bunch of anarchists and workers taking over a railroad line. It focuses on community vs. individual, just as her books did, but it does it from an anarchist perspective.

Margaret: *I watched a documentary about Ayn Rand recently, and I remember thinking that about a quarter of what she says made so much sense, and then she undermined it with all of this...*

Carissa: She's a social Darwinist and a narcissist. The Bush Administration and many of these Chicago school economists who left us in the mess we're in, loved her. Rand's theories were also very appealing to libertarians. She advocated the individual over society which is essentially an American ideal, which has been very harmful to Americans through corporate greed, family dysfunction, heightened crime, and decreased neighborhood cohesion.

Ayn Rand is confusing, just as the idea of libertarianism is confusing. As Americans, it is hard to imagine anything involving individualism can be negative. What they don't realize is that in the US, many of our problems, like our non-existent social safety net, lack of unions, non-existent left, AIG bonuses, are in a large part due to our overemphasis of the individual at the expense of the community.

Margaret: *You often mix fiction and non-fiction together. What draws you to that? It seems like a lot of the anarchist writers I've spoken to do this. A lot of people fictionalize real things, or present real things as fiction.*

Carissa: When I was 17 and writing zines, I was very influenced by Henry Miller's style of writing. The way that Miller detailed human emotion and struggle and made them into an art form was inspiring to me. This style of writing essentially requires mixing non-fiction with fiction because you have to actually experience the emotion in order to trigger it in others.

Miller wrote a book about writing where he described his writing process: when he was writing, he would focus on specific times in his life or people he loved or towns he lived in that really emotionally resonated. He would try to write about them with as much detail and emotion as possible. He found that when he did that, he was able to find his true voice. I essentially do the same thing. I start with my own tragedies, heartbreaks, love stories, friendships, and then add fictional layers on top.

Margaret: *Maybe this gets at one advantage that anarchists might have as fiction writers. A lot of youth anarchist culture is very travel-oriented, and it's about encountering new things and exploring new ideas. At its best, of course.*

Carissa: We're coming from the vantage point of being at a low social-economic level but are often very highly educated (by either formal or informal education). We also actively advocate for human equality and try to fight oppression wherever we go. We thus have a specific standpoint that we come from, and it's a very interesting, valuable standpoint.

Margaret: *You used to run a zine for a long time, Screams From the Inside. What kind of differences did you find between writing a zine versus writing a book?*

Carissa: The zine started as punk music focused (band interviews, reviews), then became political and social commentary then became a grouping of short stories. I enjoyed writing short stories but kept thinking, I wonder if I could write a book? I wondered, "Am I smart enough to do this?" Well, who knows if I'll ever be smart enough, but I pulled it off anyway. While it's gotten a lot of criticism, and the first one has so many editing problems, its publication made me realize that many of life hurdles are not such a big deal if you just work on them slowly, day by day. Before you know it, you have an entire book written.

Margaret: *Do you think there's any hope for impacting the world through fiction?*

Carissa: I think it's the same kind of hope that there is for any kind of art. But you need a combination of a lot of things. Fiction isn't just gonna change everything. What I like about fiction is that you can create a story that people can emotionally resonate with, that they can relate to. It's different than other kinds of art forms. To me, it seemed like a very good way of explaining a point of view or a way of looking at the world. The messages I've tried to communicate have been: one, we're all in this together; two, that governments, especially large governments, basically exist to protect the rich and powerful; three, we are the only ones who are able to change the conditions that oppress us; and four, that we are able to create our own types of societal structures.

I wanted the books to not just be read by anarchists; I wanted it to be read by kids in seventh grade. It was a story that seventh graders, or high school kids, could read and they could relate to and also discover that there are different ways to look at the world. One that doesn't involve trying to become powerful, getting stuff or showing off.

I always liked that quote by Woodie Guthrie—the one that starts off saying, "I hate a song that makes you think you are no good." Since most Americans don't read, "popular stories" are usually in the form of scripts which become movies. These movies, unfortunately, only show the beautiful, the rich, the

ones who make it all seem so easy. They fall in love and when they do, they do it so damn perfectly. So whenever you watch it you think—I'm too old, I'm too fat, I'm too stupid, why can't I get a better job? Why can't my hair look like that? Why doesn't he love me? And so on. I think it's worse for womyn but that's another issue entirely. So anyway, I guess I always strove to write stories that prove to all us poor slobs, us regular folks, that this is our world and we don't need to take any crap. Yes, this world is tough but there's something within us all which can bring about positive change.

Margaret: *So we can create our own cultural ideas?*

Carissa: I think that a lot of the writing I've done has focused on portraying womyn in different ways, allowing them to have different characters at different ages, doing work that is usually ignored in Hollywood movies. Because whatever gender you are, when you watch movies, or read books, you want to like some characters. You want some people to admire. A lot of times you basically build your identity around a lot of these images you see and quite simply, most of the time the womyn will pick female characters to emulate and the men will pick male characters to emulate. And maybe in that way, fiction has a lot of influence, because essentially you can create these characters that people can emulate and relationships they should strive for. You can change who is admired and who is not.

Margaret: *I think that one of the things that Yours for the Revolution really has to offer to the anarchist culture that reads it is the critique of gender power dynamics in the punk scene. When I came into punk culture after being politicized, I got the impression that it had started to become a more important thing to understand gender dynamics than it had been in the past?*

Carissa: Before riotgrrl, the punk scene was really bad. It depended on what city you were in though, because a lot of cities were worse than others. I think a lot of the East Coast cities were better. But in the Midwest, all of the boys were in punk bands, and the girls were kinda pushed away from that and put into a groupie position. They weren't being treated very well. And I used to write in my zines that as a subculture, we were striving towards an ideal and this situation surely wasn't ideal, yet true discussion was silenced. I look back on that time and I wonder why I even wanted to be part of "the scene" in the first place. But what were the other options? I mean, mainstream society was not much different.

Margaret: *I think that a lot of the zines and books like yours were really critical in starting to change that attitude.*

Carissa: Yeah, there's nothing like a bunch of people being pissed off. And essentially, womyn had finally had it. The riotgrrls were just so angry. You should have heard the way that the male punks talked about them, in the most degrading, hateful way. "How dare they say these things, they're all so unreasonable..." But when you've been degraded like that, and put into a position where you couldn't be an active member of the scene, even though you knew just as much about music and you had just as much potential to be talented, to have charisma, to have something to say... it makes you pissed off, you know?

So whatever. So what if riotgrrl said that men couldn't take the pictures at Bikini Kill shows and the womyn could? They were pissed off. That's how it works. When people are treated badly for a certain amount of time, and they have to hold it in? It accumulates, and it isn't pretty afterwards. You just have to deal with that. Otherwise, behave better. It's not complicated.

Margaret: *Earlier, you were talking about how it would be nice to reach high school, junior high kids. Do you think that you were able to?*

Carissa: I don't know. Scott has told me that a lot of young kids have come up and told him that the book is their favorite book. But I can't enter the minds of other people. I have no idea what influence it has had. There are some people that liked it. Though if you search my name online, there are a bunch of bad reviews, too, so other people really hated it. It may have touched a nerve for some people.

Margaret: *What do you think about having published with a record label and having self-published?*

Carissa: The book that I'm working on, it will probably be indie published again, because I don't spend my time in the writer's world, where you have the connections to get a big publisher to publish it. I don't want to spend my time there. I'd rather spend my time in the trenches. That's much more interesting to me. I don't want to quit my day job.

Margaret: *There might not be too many authors who don't want to quit their day jobs...*

Carissa: I think the ideal artist is somebody who deals with day-to-day events. And I think that a lot of times they're going to have a lot more genuine and interesting things to say when they're immersed in the world instead of cutting themselves off from it. And in order to really get yourself into those writer communities, you kinda have to cut yourself off from the world because you have to spend so much time on it.

Margaret: *So, we should avoid an insular writer culture, with people writing about writers all the time... oh my god, that's what I'm doing with this book. Fuck. I just talked myself into...*

Carissa: That's why you gotta hang out in dive bars, you know, take the bus more. You gotta surround yourself with people. You gotta do activism, not just political activism, but also work with community groups on community projects that need to happen, like building a community land trust to increase affordable housing or creating time dollar systems in your communities. That also involves a very anarchist notion of the redistribution of wealth and of collectively running land.

Margaret: *I think a couple of my friends just stayed at this place in St. Louis that you were talking about. They had entertaining stories about neighborhood kids coming and demanding that the place be opened, and when it didn't get opened on time, they would spraypaint, "fuck you, so-and-so," on the wall.*

Carissa: Yeah, and then they figured out how to break into the building. They learned how to pick locks from people in the neighborhood, but they didn't hurt anything. They would just go in and play office. When they were caught they said, "But we cleaned up afterwards." 

“The ideal artist is somebody who deals with day-to-day events. They’re going to have a lot more genuine and interesting things to say when they’re immersed in the world instead of cutting themselves off from it.”

—Carissa van den Berk Clark

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