

MYTHMAKERS & LAWBREAKERS

anarchist writers on fiction

“There’re benefits to books having cultural power, but there’s that power thing again. Power attracts types sometimes that are more attracted to the power than the actual passion for the actual medium.”

—Jim Munroe

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part thirteen
JIM MUNROE

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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Jim: Yeah, you'll feel more legitimate. I certainly did. There're benefits to books having cultural power, but there's that power thing again. Power attracts types sometimes that are more attracted to the power than the actual medium.

Margaret: *I like this thing that you're talking about, how we need to get storytelling out of this conservative niche, and I'm trying to wrap my brain around how to do that. I think that zine culture does a decent job of it, since everyone has a zine it's not such a big deal.*

Jim: I think there's lots of mediums in which storytelling or making art becomes... I don't want to say more inclusive. Let's say less exclusive. Because it creates a sense of artificial scarcity and creates competition amongst people. Because in the publishing world, what gets chosen to get published is a combination of things. It's certainly not the best of the best. Even though that's the way it's presented of course. My theory is that once you're an 80% or better author, in terms of quality, most people can't tell the difference. Maybe some publishers can tell the difference, but generally I think they figure the audience would be just as happy with an 85% book as an 80%. Usually other writers can tell.

But there's a big skew towards people who are good at getting their work out there, that have a story themselves that makes the book easier to sell, because they have a book that has a catchy name or cover, or any of those other things which are fine things unto themselves, but they're not basing it on writing strength alone. I feel like there's a lot of wasted talent. People keep trying to go through the bottleneck of publishers. I actually did an article, "10 ways of getting your writing out there." It's 10 different ways to get stuff out there in ways that are not strictly thinking about books as the ultimate repository of story. When people think, "Oh it's prestigious" and they have it in their heads from an early age that they want to be an author and blah blah blah. But if they know an artist who likes their writing, why wouldn't they collaborate on a comic book?

Movies are an example of something that is actually pretty accessible these days. If you have a story to tell and can take a decent picture, know someone with a DV camera, there's lots you can do to create interesting work that way. In some ways it's way more likely to be watched than to be read. How much more likely am I to watch something that's a 10 minute movie than a 300 page book? I think that people have to assess what their own media habits are, what they're most excited by. 

Jim: I hope I was coherent enough about the idea of opening people's minds in regards to genre-writing, which is what I do. That's one of the reasons that I'm drawn to video games as well; when it becomes universally accepted that they're either art or a sport or both, depending on who wins the battle, I don't think that I'll be as interested in it as a creator. One of the things that especially draws me to it is that it's got a cultural gutter status. Writing, in some ways, is such a calcified and a socially-sanctioned activity. I almost find it more enjoyable to work in comic books or in games or doing things where the forms themselves are disrespected or are considered culturally low. Because then when I do my best work, I'm not contributing to, "Oh, here's another great piece of writing." There's been lots of those.

I was at the Game Developers Conference last week in San Francisco. And the community around the games scene is quite different from any other that I've ever been in, like the publishing world or even the film world to the small extent that I've been involved with it. In those, there's a real conservatism and a sense of competition that you don't see in games to that extent. And I think that has to do with the fact that everyone is still struggling to figure out what they want to do with it, that the medium is still new enough that there isn't a calcified route to success, or calcified understandings of success. For instance, the idea of self-publishing books still has this vanity-press specter looming over it. When people finish a game and put it online, they're self-publishing it, but no one looks at it that way in the games world. It's just what you do, you put your game online. In their case it's also led to this crazy other kind of success that in some ways it's hard to imagine a similar trajectory in the writing world because it would be such a hard thing to build up your credibility after having self-published. So that's one reason I choose to self-publish, because I think the more people who do it, the less stigma it will have.

Margaret: *That's the most convincing argument I've ever heard for videogames and videogame writing.*

Jim: In some ways, I can be an advocate for games in a way that when I do it for books or even publishing in general, I feel like I'm just feeding into a very status-quo institution. So there's something that kind of undercuts my enthusiasm for it. I really wasn't aware of it at the time. In some ways, it's kind of interesting. Not to harp on how conservative the publishing industry is, but even in the radical publishing world there's a conservatism that is hard to buck. If you go into it sort of expecting that you'll have a lot more energy for it. But that's why books are given such cultural currency. When you put out a book, it'll be a big deal. Have you put out a book before?

Margaret: *No, I've done a lot zines, but this is my first "book deal."*

JIM MUNROE

Jim Munroe is a writer of all sorts of things. He's written novels, such as Everyone in Silico and Flyboy Action Figure Comes with Gasmask. He's written comic books, like the post-rapture Therefore Repent! and Time Management for Anarchists. He writes videogames and movies. He self-publishes near-everything he does, and he runs a website, NOMEDIAKINGS.ORG, which holds an extensive collection of DIY articles to help other people do the same. His publishing label, No Media Kings, is an open one, which he invites other people to brand their work with.

He's also pulled some interesting activist stunts using his skills as a writer, some of which he told me about when I called him in Canada. We also spoke about different mediums, anarchism, PR, and how to derail art back into the cultural gutter where perhaps it belongs.

Margaret: *So you're a big fan of self-publishing, or at least alternatives to mainstream publishing. Why is that?*

Jim: I think one of the best ways to oppose media consolidation is by prolifera-

tion of small, independent presses and media outlets of all sorts. One way is to directly critique and confront consolidation in all its forms; if that's tearing down, then building up is working on building viable, sustainable alternatives to it.

Margaret: *You encourage other people to make things as well, to write stories. Is this to try to break down the pedestal that authors are on?*

Jim: For sure. My feelings about other creators is that they aren't competitors. A lot of people are caught in this mindset that somehow other people making stuff is going to take food out of their mouths. And that's never made any emotional or rational sense to me. Basically, what I've gotten from what other people create is just as valuable as money that I would get from someone who bought a book. That's just as sustaining to me as money to pay rent or to buy food.

Margaret: *So a mutual aid situation, instead of a competitive one?*

Jim: Yeah. The whole zero-sum game mentality has never made any sense to me, because the majority of my formative creative time was in a community, specifically in the zine community. I also went to university for creative writing, got a BA in creative writing and English, and in university there was more of a sense of, "Only one of you will be a published author." But I was kinda immune to that because it was being proven wrong by my life experience.

Margaret: *How did you end up making the move from just doing zines to work in lots of different mediums, like books and interactive fiction?*

Jim: Part of me was intrigued by doing a book with a spine instead of in a saddle-stitch format, but really there're lots of zines that are better quality and more interesting than books. I'm an unrepentant medium-hopper. I enjoy many different mediums, and it makes sense for me to want to do stuff in lots of different mediums. I'm lucky enough that I'm connected to a community of makers, many of whom have different skills in terms of art, or directing, different kinds of skillsets, so the possibility of collaborating with people who are very talented in those areas is really appealing.

I think one of the reasons that working in different mediums is fun for me is that I enjoy transgressing boundaries, which probably relates to my anarchist tendencies. A lot of people, when faced with the idea of having to go over a boundary, such as going from novelist to filmmaker, or from novelist to computer-game maker, they find that intimidating, it makes them uncomfortable. Even though it's largely a fictional or socially invented role, people are more comfortable within those roles than transgressing them. And I get a kick out of that. I get energy from things that other people find draining.

The only reason I would name something *Time Management for Anarchists* is that I feel like the content of it is such that it draws people more deeply into the idea than if I called it *Anarchism for Anarchists* or something like that. That intentional dissonance is useful as propaganda. Because in the end, I am an anarchist. Even anarchists can get something out of this. I believe in anarchism as a set of a ways of thinking about the world and have for close to 20 years at this point. Even though my nature is to subvert and make fun of everything, in this case I feel like it's in the service of exposing more people to the ideas. Because I think in the end they are useful ideas.

I don't think like, "Oh you should be exposed to these ideas because I want you to be like me." But it's rather like, "Actually, that constant dissatisfaction that you have at your job might be totally normal for you and it's not something that you should be constantly be ashamed of or be fighting. In fact you should harness that to do what *you* want." Anarchism has weirdly played this role in my life where it's been normalizing. Where it's sort of said, "Actually, yeah, those feelings that you feel every time you're in a power-charged situation is not cause you're fucked up." Well maybe cause I'm fucked up, but the reason I'm feeling these ways is connected to this philosophy about the corrosive nature of power.

Margaret: *How did you get interested in anarchism?*

Jim: Just hearing about it from reading Crass record labels or Conflict sleeves. When I was about 14 or 15 there was an anarchist ungathering in Toronto, and I had my cool aunt bring me to it. I can't say in particular, "Oh it was really great, that was the gathering that changed my way of thinking." I can't say it was really appealing at first. Punk rock as a scene was way more dynamic and interesting than the discussions that were being had in the sort-of official anarchist ungatherings. The punk rock scene was way more creative, even in terms of the songwriting and the art that went into it.

I did a fair amount of serious reading, George Woodcock's *The Anarchist Reader*, when I was 17. I did my World Issues project on anarchism and did a presentation to my Catholic all-boy high school. That was pretty good; it helped me learn how much I hated being at places like that. In some ways that was more formative than a really artsy, more hippy art school might have been. I became aware of the people that I didn't want to be like. I did a seminar in another class on veganism. I'm still vegan. Around the same time a lot of things were clicking into place politically for me, and since then I've continually found them a useful and worthwhile practice.

Margaret: *Do you have any final thoughts on the broad question of this whole book, the intersection of anarchism and fiction?*

something wrong and that they want to change it, they have to have a certain determination and bring a certain amount of gravitas to the table. So I feel your pain. It would be cool if there were more people who were into doing it, but I also think that there's plenty of people on the fringes.

The thing that I found really interesting, I did that Time Management for Anarchists seminar at infoshops and, as I said, I'm not the best performer, but there was a, "Are you making fun of us?" kind of vibe. Because I don't wear the uniform and I haven't since I was a teenager, so that was a little bit.... Those were the people I intended the ideas to be for, for people who were younger, frustrated with not being as organized as they would like, to give them a few handy tips to help them fuck shit up.

But what I found, weirdly, was that when I put it online, it found a whole different audience of people who were punk-friendly and punk-interested, but they wouldn't identify as punks or even as anarchists. They were interested in those things, and maybe would be dissatisfied, but wouldn't necessarily be part of the subculture. What I found is that it probably helped way more people, even though I never intended it for that audience. Not to say that I'm not interested in telling stories for the anarchist audience anymore, but it is something that has been interesting to me. When you open it sometimes, it finds an audience of people who maybe need it more and are broader.

Margaret: *I had a similar experience running SteamPunk Magazine... I'm so used to writing for the anarchist and zine subcultures, and all of the sudden it was appealing to an incredibly broad internet culture that wasn't necessarily as radical. It confused me at first but I think in the end it was good.*

Jim: That's interesting, because it's a serialized thing, so did you find that you loosened up your writing, or included things that otherwise you wouldn't have, or didn't include things you would have?

Margaret: *Yeah. Because I had this particular version of what steampunk was in my mind, and I found myself realizing that all of these other people had all of these other ideas and that I should actually listen to them as well and write about things, include things I wouldn't have otherwise.*

Jim: That's interesting. I think I found that with humor in particular, it was sort of tolerated but not really encouraged within the anarchist scene. With tons of exceptions of course, but it gets weird when I call something *Time Management for Anarchists* or I use the word anarchism. I think it makes people uncomfortable, like "That's not my anarchism. Don't proliferate your version of anarchism in this whimsical or not-serious or capitalist or whatever way" that they imagine that I'm creating. Which I understand, I don't take it lightly, the use of the word. I wouldn't do the same thing with, say, communism.

Margaret: *What do you think can be accomplished by writing fiction?*

Jim: One of the reasons I write science fiction in particular is that when people believe in something that is stated from the outset to be fantastical, they're opening themselves up to new possibilities. I feel like that's a muscle that, the more we exercise, the more potential we have for really thinking about creative solutions about our real life. I like writing science fiction as well because people assume it's a trash, or a cultural-gutter kind of genre. I enjoy crafting what I consider to be good writing within that genre because people read it and they have to reassess their beliefs. "Well okay, I don't like science fiction, but I like your work," is something I hear a lot. And that's great, because it means that I've overturned someone's assumptions about what is low and what is high art, about what they like and what they don't like. If they question that, they're more likely to question other things in their daily lives. I think fiction in general has a potential to get people into a more creative line of thinking about real life as well.

Margaret: *Can you tell me the story about how you and some people set out to fight gentrification with science fiction stories as graffiti?*

Jim: Sure. It started with a little talk I gave at Active Resistance [a radical conference] in 1998. I had a talk about grafting activism and science fiction together as a radical, creative beast that could hopefully transform society. I called it Science Friction or something like that. What we decided to do was to address the gentrification that was going on in Kensington Market [a neighborhood of Toronto]. We wrote Kensington Market 2020 stories; one-page stories that brought to light some of the possibilities for the future of the neighborhood. We made photocopies and put them up as flyposters in the market with a little email address for people who were interested, though largely it was intended as a piece of public art for anyone walking by so they could read about our possible visions of the future of the neighborhood.

That was pretty fun, so we did it again for two other streets, one was addressing consumerism, Queen Street West 2020, and one was addressing the future of education, called U of T 2020, University of Toronto 2020. We did a couple of those flyposter series. It's hard to gauge the success of those types of things, but our intent was engage in the public in a broader way than just at anarchist gatherings.

Margaret: *One thing that I've found interesting is that you have very non-traditional PR when you put a book. You used to be an editor for Adbusters, so you clearly choose carefully where you advertise your books...*

Jim: Yeah, I have a sensitivity to stupid advertising, which is what drew me to *Adbusters* in the beginning. As much as I have an aversion to advertising, there

is a social value to telling people about cultural products and other products. The problem is that it's so over-emphasized in our society that you get a sort of hype-nausea from an overdose of hype. A little hype isn't so bad, but the amount that we're constantly assaulted with is ridiculous. I had to figure out a way to promote my own work that I felt good about.

My favorite so far was my *Everyone In Silico* campaign. The difference between me doing promotion for my books versus someone else doing it is that I'm far more creatively invested, so it's way more engaging and I'm also kind of creatively closer to it so it actually makes me more effective than an average PR firm that is used to doing whatever for whomever.

It really came together for that particular book. I was just going through the manuscript, and I had had to mention all of these brands because in the future the brand intensification is even more than it is now, but I feel a little silly giving them free advertising in my book. So I actually invoiced them for product placement. Proactively, before they've actually agreed to it or found it interesting or are even aware of it. I liked that idea. It also came from a dissatisfaction from how I'd promoted previous books, where I was just reading a couple sections from them. I felt like that was a broken way to promote them, giving people a taste of a book. It would be like, "Oh I got this new song... Da du-dah.... [Jim sings a few notes]." You play a few notes from a novel and you don't really get across the same thing as it would be to be alone with the book sitting on your couch or whatever. That inherent disjointedness of a traditional novel reading, combined with the complete inadequacy of most writers to dramatically perform their readings—which is kinda what's necessary for an engaging performance—leads to fucking trainwreck after trainwreck of reading. So I was dedicated to the idea of working with things that were more performative. I'm not necessarily a very good performer, but even a bad performer is better than an inadequate reader.

Writing those past due letters was fun because it let me take more direct stabs at these companies that I'd mentioned, allowing me to bring up various things I knew about their evil corporate histories that I wasn't able to really discuss in the book. Because one of the things about the future in *Everyone in Silico* is those corporate crimes aren't really known... the futuristic element is that people aren't critical of corporations anymore. It's become such a part of our lives that we can't imagine what it would be like without them. So to maintain the integrity of the book I couldn't take the shots at the corporations that I secretly wanted to. The letters allowed me a forum to make more direct political critiques of the corporations and at the same time create something more suitable for doing a reading.

It was a great success in that people really responded in an immediate way and left with a sense of where the book was coming from, rather than a literal translation.

Margaret: *On your website it's mentioned that most radical presses are shying away from fiction as a risky investment. Why do you think that is?*

Jim: Often people who run radical presses, their first passion isn't necessarily fiction. They might like fiction *as well*, but it's kind of specialized in some ways. If you look at the requirements from a publisher for non-fiction versus fiction... for instance, you can sometimes write a non-fiction book and get an advance for an outline, but you can never do that—unless you're incredibly well-established as an author—with a novel. You have to have the novel written essentially and you submit it and hope they go for it. Even with publishers for whom fiction is their bread and butter and it's kind of their main thing, they're more conservative.

There's just an element where people aren't 100% sure of their tastes. They know what they like from non-fiction radical books. They also realize that there's a tremendous amount of work that's required once you do start accepting fiction. Because there's just going to be an onslaught of manuscripts coming in, and that requires some sort of management. If you consider a radical community, how many people would consider sitting down and doing the research and writing a book on Emma Goldman versus the number of people who would write a memoir-style story about their lives? You'd get way more of the latter, and you'd basically have to deal with, regardless of quality, a huge amount of ego and logistical stuff, dealing with the amount of mail you would get and whatnot. Even if you're thinking outside of the radical community, like if you get listed in one of those places like Writer's Market, you just get so much stuff in the mail that it becomes a job unto itself. I think those are some considerations.

Margaret: *How do we encourage radical fiction? It seems like there's a pretty strong disconnect between people interested in theory versus people interested in reading fiction.*

Jim: I would say that there're a lot of creative punks, but there're lots of not-so-creative punks, you know what I mean? I like punk rock in the sense that it... looked at it in one way, it's kinda like a cosplay [costume play, like the people who wear Star Trek uniforms to conventions] situation. Most punk rockers would not find that amusing for instance. [He says as I laugh.] I think that the whimsy that comes with fiction is something that is missing from the scene. I mean, there's also a strong element of punk rock that *doesn't* take itself seriously.

But that's where I think the disconnect is, is that people are not so into the humor side of things sometimes. Maybe that's for the best. I think that if punk rock was just this big joke it would lose some of its cultural significance. As I said, I'm torn about it, because I think, "Ah, I wish they could lighten up," but then I realize that they *have* to take it seriously. If they really do feel like there's