

MYTHMAKERS & LAWBREAKERS

anarchist writers on fiction

“Stories are how people orient their sense of who they are in the world, and how the world is supposed to be, and how we’re supposed to be in it.”

—Starhawk

part fourteen

STARHAWK

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Margaret Killjoy

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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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STARHAWK

*Starhawk is an activist pagan who has been involved in non-hierarchical organizing for a good deal longer than I've been alive. She's also a fairly prolific writer, writing such non-fiction books as *The Spiral Dance*, *The Earth Path*, and *Webs of Power*. The book that I wanted to talk to her about, though, was *The Fifth Sacred Thing*, a novel that explores two societies: a pacifist-anarchist San Francisco of consensus organizing, cultural diversity, and mutual aid economics; and a fascistic Los Angeles of rigid hierarchy, racism, and war-mongering.*

I tracked her down when she was speaking at a women's conference in North Carolina, and we spoke about what it means to be a witch and a writer, about what it means to be mildly famous in a culture that eschews fame, about how we can use fiction and storytelling to focus our energies on positive change. And we talked about how to keep our stories from being purely propaganda—that is, how to make sure they stay good stories.

Margaret: *What kind of power can myth and story have? How can storytelling help our activism?*


Starhawk: I think myth and story can have incredible power. They unleash the imagination, and the imagination is where all change begins. You can't make

had them wear white in *The Fifth Sacred Thing* [when the characters decide to “haunt” enemy soldiers] was to try to counter the imagery of black always being negative, white being good, black being death. In the old European traditions, white was the color of death, but black was the color of fertile earth, of the womb, of life.

Margaret: *I was wondering if you had any advice for radical fiction writers?*

Starhawk: When you're writing fiction, you have to serve the story first, rather than serving the politics of the moment. Trust that if you're truly radical, your story is going to actually serve your political ends. And don't be afraid to really grapple with the questions rather than think that you have to put forth the answers.

The other thing I would say is that anarchists don't buy a lot of books. So you might want to think of yourself not just as an anarchist writer but also as a writer who deals with these things. If you're really true to the story, to the human conflicts in the story, they're going to resonate with a larger circle of people than just your anarchist friends. Go out and meet more people outside of that circle, and that will make you a stronger writer.

And to remember Garrison Keillor's quote: “Things that are horrible for most people are good for writers.” The advantage of being an anarchist writer is that you often have more life experience than a lot of other people. I've been doing screenwriting, and have a Hollywood agent. And Hollywood is full of all of these kids who get out of school and want to be screenwriters but have no life experience, have never done anything but go to movies and write screenplays. I've met editors who are like that too, they've never *done* anything. They end up somewhere not knowing how to call a taxi to get to the hotel and they're in terror. Being a radical you get a lot of life experience and you get to see a lot of things that other people don't get to see. You get to experience a level of reality that a lot of people don't get to experience. And I think that it's important that we do write about that, that we put that out in ways that can touch people on those deeper emotional levels that fiction can reach. 

think a lot of people realize that we actually have a choice, that the society that's in San Francisco in *The Fifth Sacred Thing* is actually an option. It gives people a picture of that option, which is a magical act. If we can imagine this, we can do this.

Margaret: *What are the dangers in a non-hierarchical movement of being a storyteller, of having fame?*

Starhawk: It can be a contradiction to be mildly famous in a culture that doesn't believe in fame or celebrity. I don't feel like it's dangerous in the sense that... I don't think that there's any community that would do something just because I said to do it. I think most anarchist community tends to be the opposite. "Starhawk said it so let's not do it, we don't want her to throw her weight around, it'll get too ugly."

Fame is a pain in the ass sometimes, because it gets in the way of just meeting people and having actual connections and relationships with them, but usually that wears off very quickly. It can be more dangerous when... I don't know if it's so much from fiction as from non-fiction, you get a lot of writers and theorists, where people latch onto those theories and take them into action sometimes maybe not because they really had the time or the thought or the experience to work out for themselves what actually makes sense and what's strategic, but because they think that's the way you should do things if you're really an anarchist. You can get people ripe for being manipulated or infiltrated or trapped into doing things.

Margaret: *As soon as you put dogma in the picture, not that we intend to create dogma, but that people could take things as dogma, it really leaves us vulnerable.*

Starhawk: Non-hierarchical things don't work so much through rules as through norms. The thing about norms is that they're often unspoken. They're not overtly imposed, but that makes it even harder to challenge them. I'll give you one example. A couple of years ago I went to the anarchist bookfair, and it was the same day as the Eostar festival, and I was wearing bright emerald green, and it was a complete sea of black. There was not another color among hundreds of people.

It was like a weird psychological experiment. I'd never felt so uncomfortable. It's not like anyone came up to say, "Who the hell are you?" or anything. But it was so powerful. I remember thinking, it's so ironic, here we are, here's the gathering of the people who are the most anti-authoritarian and non-conformist, but there's this total conformity in the color code of what you're supposed to wear. If the anarchist bookfair put something out that said, "You can only enter if you wear black," everyone would be up in arms.

I do tend to wear black a lot, because you can be a witch, an anarchist, or a sophisticated New Yorker with the same wardrobe, all you need to do is switch your accessories. And it's slenderizing and doesn't show dirt. My friend Luisah Teish, she's a Yoruba priest, she's always on my case about wearing black because it attracts all the energies. They always wear white. Part of the reason I

the change unless you can envision it. I think sometimes in our politics we're very good at knowing what we're against, what we're angry about, what we don't want. But we have more power when we have at least some kind of vision of what we *do* want. The nice thing about fiction is that we can create that vision and play it out at very low cost. It's a lot easier to imagine San Francisco transformed than it is to actually go renovate all the buildings. You can do thought experiments.

I think to be good fiction it has to be more than that.... Your characters have to kind of come alive for you. You end up grappling with things that you didn't realize you were going to grapple with when you started out.

I think that stories are how people orient their sense of who they are in the world, and how the world is supposed to be, and how we're supposed to be in it. People use stories to take a look at different ways of being in the world. For me, as a young woman, there were some books that I was tremendously influenced by, in various ways, that were really formative in the process of me telling myself who I am, who I want to be.

Margaret: *What kind of effects do you think that *The Fifth Sacred Thing* has had?*

Starhawk: I think that it's had an effect on people in the movement, in that it's given people a picture of what the world could be like. Many people have said to me, "I want to go live in that place." It's a way of carving out some ground that people can stand on and start thinking, "How do we create the world that we want?"

Part of the political vision that I held when I wrote it was a world that was environmentally balanced, but also a world that was multiracial, multicultural, that was founded on social justice. It was really important that those things went together. At the time that I wrote it, approaching 1992 and the 500th anniversary of Columbus, there was a lot of activist work around diversity, a lot of critique of the environmental movement, the feminist movement, and the direct action movement as being basically white movements. We were struggling with these questions of how we could be inclusive. And to me, part of how we can do that is to at *least* be inclusive in your imagination. At least envision a world that very consciously looks at the those questions around race, class, culture, religion, and language, and a society where diversity is seen as a gift.

The other influence that the book had, inadvertently, was around sexuality and polyamory. Which is funny to me now because, for me personally, that's never worked. But when I wrote the book, during a dry period in my life, it was pure fantasy. So I probably inadvertently broke a lot of hearts.

I think that polyamory probably works better for younger people than for people of my generation: for all of our politics and our thinking, we were raised with certain expectations and we're much more constrained than the generations that have come since the sixties and since the gay movement and all of that.

Margaret: *As part of your ecofeminism [in which oppressions such as gender and environmental destruction are viewed as linked], you chose to portray races and genders in a very egalitarian way...*

Starhawk: Because I was writing about a time where people would have in some ways transcended racism, I don't identify people as one race or the other in the book. I try to just describe them. A lot of people never realized that Bird [the protagonist] was black. There are a couple points later in the book where characters actually say something about it as they encounter racism. It was interesting to me that people didn't catch that unless it was labeled.

Margaret: *I notice you did a lot of describing without actually...*

Starhawk: I spent a lot of time on busses and things when I was writing it, staring at people, deep in thought, thinking, "How could I describe that particular shade of skin color?"

Margaret: *What kind of place do you think that politics have in fiction?*

Starhawk: For me politics are about engaging the really crucial issues of our times. And I think it's really important to write fiction about that too. I like to write about people who are engaged and passionate, who have a huge desire to do something important like change the world, and what they run up against in trying to do that. Politics are a really fertile ground for writing.

It's very important for us when we do political work to also see our struggles reflected in our culture. And we don't see that all that much. Part of that is because publishers are always looking—especially right now as publishing gets more and more corporate—for what's going to appeal to the mainstream, to the biggest number of people. The life of the activist or the life of an anarchist seems very strange and weird and marginalized and isn't going to sell books. The markets aren't there. The larger culture is not going to reflect the counterculture that we build, but I think it's important for us to have those kinds of reflections, to *create* those kinds of reflections. To use fiction—which is a very powerful tool—for confronting some of those major issues that we confront.

Margaret: *So mainstream publishers are more and more shying away from political fiction, but I've also discovered that a lot of radical publishers shy away from fiction.*

Starhawk: Yeah, you're neither fish nor fowl. Which is probably part of why I haven't written more fiction since *The Fifth Sacred Thing*. Also, for many years I haven't felt like I've had the time and mental space I needed to create a fictional world; I've been too busy doing too many things. It's easier to write non-fiction, because you can say, "Alright, I'll just sit down and write this," whereas with fiction you have to let it grow and evolve.

I think that political publishers are focused on serious, real things. I also

amass as much physical wealth as possible, that we're here to obey those who are above you in the hierarchy, to give orders to those below you?

Clearly, doing political action isn't easy. People go through really hard things: they get traumatized, beaten and jailed, get attacked, and even sometimes get killed. And you need to have some way to come together to deal with those things. That's where ritual becomes really important, helping us face those things that are too big to face alone.

Margaret: *I want to talk more about story, as it relates to magic.*

Starhawk: In magic we say that manifestation follows the path of energy. And energy follows the path of imagery, and imagery follows the path of intention. So if you're consciously doing magical work, you start with your intention, then find the imagery that reflects your intention, then direct energy through that. That sort of pulls in the force of the manifestation. A lot of the ways we do that, consciously and unconsciously, is through story. We're constantly telling ourselves stories about ourselves and who we are and what we can be. Those stories tend to generate energies. If you're telling yourself stories like, "I'm an anarchist hero fighting the forces of evil," you're going to have a different view of things than if you tell yourself the story that the culture might be telling about you, "You're a loser terrorist about to get stomped by the cops." You create a different emotional energy and probably different actions.

Fiction does that in a more complex way; for it to work you can't just have the positive intention. You have to have an intention countered by a lot of things to create the drama that makes it exciting and makes it a story. The classic story form is you have a protagonist who wants something, has a goal, a desire, and you have something happen to unbalance the status quo and that hero pursues those goals against a series of obstacles, challenges, enemies, until finally there's a resolution.

When I was writing *The Fifth Sacred Thing*, I was thinking about it consciously as magic, that I was creating this vision of the world, and it was like creating a magical image that energy could get poured into. But I also said to myself, "Okay I don't want to create certain parts of that reality."

Margaret: *You don't want to create the fascist society you depicted...*

Starhawk: Yeah, the Bush administration was doing that for us.

But on the other hand, *The Fifth Sacred Thing* had almost this element of prophecy. When I wrote it I could see very clearly two paths of the future, that we had a choice between which one we could go down. So I took each of the them to their logical extreme and said, "What will it be like if they clash?" If they clash we can take a look at them and see them clearly and make choices about them as a culture. I think that that's one of the things that fiction, especially speculative fiction, can do; it can show you those different possibilities and potentials, and it can take you into them at much less cost than actually going there and making those choices yourself to see how they play out. It lets you play them out so that the choices we actually have become a lot clearer. I don't

no authority anywhere in a system, there's no way to move a conflict out of a community or resolve it. So it can just sort of reverberate forever until the whole thing is destroyed. And I've seen that happen a lot in a lot of collective groups that I've been involved in. They're wonderful for awhile but then when people start grappling with conflict, and people with difficult personalities, they tend to fall apart. They tend to be very short-lived. If by some miracle they become longer-lived, then you get questions like, if everyone has equal say but some people have a much longer-term investment in the organization, is that actually equal? Is that actually fair? How do you work around that? That's what I'm writing about.

Margaret: *You were talking about earth-based spirituality, non-hierarchical spirituality, where the authority is within yourself. I'm under the impression that you're one of the primary people who works to carry that over from the spiritual sphere to the political?*

Starhawk: For me, the political sphere and the spiritual sphere or the moral sphere, aren't really separable. And I think that's the core of the philosophy of nonviolence too... you say that you're answering to a higher law, or a deeper law, which means that sometimes you break the law. Martin Luther King had a great definition for an unjust law, which is a law which the people it affects had no voice in making. Sometimes you need to stand in the way of a greater injustice.

I also think that a lot of times people use spirituality as a way to not engage with the political sphere. We have a big ritual in San Francisco every year for Halloween, the spiral dance. Oftentimes, as much as we've brought spirituality into our political activism, we've also brought political imagery into our spirituality. A couple times we've invoked a direction [invoking the four directions is part of many pagan rituals] by... one time we had a bunch of climbers up at the ceiling and when we called in the north, they dropped three giant banners while people were chanting, "Ain't no power like the power of the people cause the power of the people don't stop." We've used political chants that we've done on the streets in the ritual. Sometimes we get feedback like, "I don't come to a ritual to get propagandized."

I've actually written something about how spirituality serves different needs. One of those needs is for comfort, for safety, to provide a community where people feel like they're at home and can lick their wounds. But real spirituality is not just about doing what you're comfortable doing, it's about pushing your edges, about getting pushed into uncomfortable places and grappling with the things that are going on around us in the world as well as the things that are going on within ourselves. I also think that our politics are much more powerful if our political spaces are places where people have room to grapple with the bigger questions, spiritual questions like, "What are we here for," and, "What is life about." I think that those are tremendously political questions. If we don't know what we're here for, then how do we know what we want our society to do for us? If we don't know what we're here for, then how do we counter the point of view that says that we're here to consume products, that we're here to

think that it's challenging to be writing fiction when you're part of your movement, because you feel accountable to that movement. Because fiction has to involve conflict, it can't just be propaganda. If you're writing fiction, you're grappling with questions that you don't know the answers to. And when you're doing political work, we're usually very clear that we *do* know what the right answers are and everyone should listen to us and follow us. So it's tricky to write fiction that works for your political community but still goes deeper than whatever the particular answers are that we have at the moment.

Margaret: *I like that idea, that fiction makes people question, and that maybe it's a better way to get people to question ideology in general? It seems like that's one of the roles of an anarchist anyway, is not to get people to listen to them but to get people to question.*

Starhawk: Writing *The Fifth Sacred Thing*, there were two questions that I was grappling with. One was, I was doing all this research on these peaceful, egalitarian goddess cultures that got overrun and changed into patriarchal cultures. So if you have a peaceful society, how do you defend it against violence? And the other is a question about violence and non-violence. At the time I wrote it I was much more deeply involved in a much stricter form of non-violence than we've seen in the last 10 years or so. But also, being involved in Latin American solidarity work... how do you do non-violence if you're really facing a ruthless enemy? How might it work?

Some people think that the novel is a great novel about non-violence. But in a way it really isn't. Although Tom Hayden [an activist] said that I should have made stronger arguments for violence. But in the end, the success comes when the army rebels and there's violence. It's brought about by non-violence, but I couldn't even in fiction just make it work where the general and the people controlling the army just change their hearts. I mean, I could have just written it, but it wouldn't have made good fiction.

In fiction you need conflict. In life you *get* conflict, but you don't necessarily *need* to have it. Garrison Keillor [a radio personality and author] has a quote, "Things that are horrible for most people are good for writers." I've often thought about that.

Margaret: *That's what I always tell myself, if I end up going to jail, plenty of time to write. Still don't want to. Would rather write in the safety of a punk house somewhere.*

Starhawk: Sometimes you can get pen and paper, but it's hard to get your laptop in.

Margaret: *I spent a little while in The Netherlands, and this person was convicted of throwing a molotov at a cop... she didn't do it. But she was convicted and only got seven months, which blew my mind. When she got out, she was complaining, "They let me have my guitar, but I didn't get my typewriter until right before I got out."*

Starhawk: Yet we've got those two kids from Austin who got six years for *thinking* about throwing a molotov cocktail.

Margaret: *I interviewed Alan Moore and he had a lot of things to say about anarchism and magic, and he was saying that people usually think about communism and capitalism are the two poles of political thought, but he thinks that anarchism and fascism are more useful. He also compares that to magic and religion, as two equivalent poles.*

Starhawk: Well, clearly, I'm deeply involved in magic. Although for me, I think of magic as being the technology and the spirituality as being earth-based spirituality, as being goddess-based spirituality. Although when I got involved in the seventies, the most important aspect was that of the goddess being the female image of divinity, the image of beneficent female power, because it was a counter to everything I'd grown up with. Now, over the years, I feel like it's more important to see the goddess as Gaia, the living planet that we're all a part of, the earth-based aspect of it that is inclusive of man and woman, and is nature-based. I think there is an inherent anti-authoritarianism in those traditions, in spirituality. In any tradition that says you need to locate spiritual authority in yourself, not in somebody else, not in some outside force, not in your dead relatives, but within. I think that it's an important aspect of any kind of anti-authoritarian political tradition.

I think that roughly I'd agree with him. Capitalism and communism share a lot. Communism was a kind of odd hybrid of this egalitarian view of economics that got welded to this top-down view of control. And capitalism is this odd hybrid of this less-controlled view of economics but one that is based on this view of human nature that says that greed is the core of human nature, welded to systems of much more subtle control. And anarchism, in its sort of pure form, is about saying that we want to have societies that are not based on coercive power, but that are based on free association and mutual aid. And we believe that people have a deep desire to make a contribution to society and don't need to be forced to do it, that that's a powerful human drive. We believe in less control and more liberty and freedom. It is opposed to that fascism that creeps into both communism and capitalism that says we must control everything.

At the same time, if you were to ask me what actual practical political policies do I support at this moment in time, I'm probably actually more of a progressive democrat. Go Obama, we need more regulation, we need more government actually providing for human needs and human services, we actually need big structures to do some of the big things that need to be done about climate change while we're evolving to that point of freedom and mutual aid.

Margaret: *I've been running across authors that identify with philosophical anarchism, with anarchism as a desired end result, but think that revolution*

isn't necessarily the way to get there. I suppose that's how I would presume to identify you?

Starhawk: Yeah, I'd say at this moment, probably. Maybe it's because in my own lifetime, over the last 40 or more years of being consciously political, having gone through the sixties, believing in the revolution, I don't actually see it happening anytime soon. I don't see most people in the world clamoring for it, and I see a need for some big things to be done that can only be done by big structures.

But I also see an interesting evolution towards non-hierarchical organization. The book that I'm working on now is a non-fiction book on group process and group dynamics in non-hierarchical groups, because I see so many of them struggling over conflict and process stuff. So I decided I should do some research. Sure, I've done 40 years of research on this, but I figured I should at least read what other people are saying about it. And it's interesting, because where you find theory about group behavior and dynamics is either in new-age self-help and pop psychology or in business management. So I've been reading a lot of books from different points of view. And I've discovered this whole series of books that are mostly about the internet. One's called *The Starfish and the Spider* [by Ori Brafman and Rod Beckstrom], which is a very interesting book for an anarchist to read because it's about how organizations are either like a spider, where if you cut off its head the organization doesn't function, or a starfish, which grows a new limb or a new starfish. It's talking about decentralized organizations. Mostly it talks about these things in the context of the internet, about self-organized systems like Wikipedia. Or things like open-sourced software, things that people have contributed to without getting monetary reward because they want to make something happen without anyone organizing it or orchestrating it. It's fascinating to me because I'd never really seen the internet in those terms. But there's this whole other force pushing towards horizontal, non-hierarchical organization that isn't coming from political ideology, or really *any* ideology, but from people's attraction to doing cool things.

Margaret: *It's interesting to talk to people from the geek point of view, people who are much more used to seeing the internet from those points of view. Essentially, the idea is that as communication proliferates, the need for top-down authority disappears. That's paired, though, in my mind, to the rather dire need of the earth for a little bit less new technology or at least...*

Starhawk: Less new *stuff*. That's one reason I wanted to write a book on group process, because all of those internet books are all gung-ho about how wonderful this all is, and to some degree it is, but few of these people have worked in non-hierarchical organizations for over 30 years or more. And things change over time; new things come up that you can't really anticipate when something is new.

Conflicts come up, and the question of how you resolve conflict when there's no authority in the system is a really interesting one. Because if there's