

# MYTHMAKERS & LAWBREAKERS

anarchist writers on fiction

“Any book that doesn’t start from the fact that this culture is killing the planet and work to resolve that is unforgivable. We’d be better off with blank pages.”

—Derrick Jensen

part two  
**DERRICK JENSEN**

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edited by  
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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](http://www.tangledwilderness.org) or bought from AK Press at [www.akpress.org](http://www.akpress.org)

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

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## DERRICK JENSEN

*My friend and I hitch-hiked down to California to interview Derrick Jensen, an author better known for his radical philosophy than for fiction. But I had read *Walking on Water*, a book he wrote about writing and education, and it was one of the impetuses for this collection.*


*It was a windy, rainy day in a rather dull, lifeless, stripmall sort of town, and when my friend and I spotted a small circle-A graffitied on a grocery store we immediately began to suspect Derrick. He met us and directed us to a nearly empty restaurant where we conducted our interview. I didn't work up the nerve to ask him about the graffiti. Instead, we talked about finding a publisher, language, fiction, writing, anarchism, and *Dungeons & Dragons*. He even managed to bring my sex life into the conversation. Politely, mind you.*

**Margaret:** *Among your numerous non-fiction books, you've got one that's about creative writing, *Walking on Water*. But still, it took you years to find a publisher for your two novels. Can you tell me about how hard it was to find a publisher and why you think that was?*

ence. It's an interactive thing, and a lot of people don't understand that and a lot of people's writing ends up being essentially journal writing that someone else is supposed to read. It's like, "Why the fuck am I supposed to read this? It's boring as hell." And I really like the way she puts that because it's essentially like masturbating with another person. It's like, "Hi I'm here, I'm having a great time, you don't exist, but I don't care." Which is of course the patriarchal model. Tell her I think her work has been really vital.

**Margaret:** *She also wrote possibly my favorite line about anarchism: "An anarchist is one who, given the choice, chooses responsibility." [I misquoted her slightly. My apologies.]*

**Derrick:** That's great, under that definition, yeah, I'll call myself an anarchist. One of the problems I've had with a lot of anarchists, is that frankly, I've known a lot of "anarchists" for whom it was basically an excuse to be irresponsible, and to be fuckups.

I got into this little argument with these kids several years ago. They were saying that anarchism is about doing whatever you want whenever you want to do it. I said, you know, let's say we're all going to do an action. And you decide at the last minute that you don't feel like doing it tonight, you're going to watch a movie, you're going to stay at home and smoke pot. And because you don't show up, the action fails and my brother dies. I'm gonna kill you. Because my brother is dead because of you, because you chose to stay home and smoke pot. There has to be accountability if we're going to have any sort of real movement, there has to be discipline. The truth is I would want to vet him out beforehand, so I wouldn't get in the position where I was relying on him in the first place. 

then you can have this huge body count in a movie. But the problem is, if you put a body count together with the analysis, it's not additive but multiplicative, do you see what I'm trying to say?

**Margaret:** *When I was talking to Ursula Le Guin about it, she mentioned that fiction was good for what people used to call consciousness raising, creating a culture... I feel like that's one thing that your work has contributed to.*

**Derrick:** One of the reasons I don't bother to learn primitive living skills is that I'm not going to survive the crash. Either those in power will kill me... Somebody asked John Stockwell, "If everything you say about the CIA is true, then why are you still alive?" "Because they're winning." And so I'm safe for now. I can say whatever I want, they don't give a shit. But if they start to lose, we're all dead. And one's purity and one's silence won't save you. Those in power will do what it takes to maintain power.

That's one thing, the other thing is that Crohn's Disease will kill me. So I'm dead through the crash. But that's okay because if the big revolution comes that I've been working for my whole professional life, my whole personal life at this point, if that came, I'd be done anyway, my work's done. My work is about creating culture where what I'm writing about can take place. And once it starts, my work takes a long time... Jesus, if I finished a book today, it doesn't come out for at least a year. There's a big time lag, and then after that, people have to read it, people have to digest it, they have to internalize it, they have to metabolize it, they have to shit out what they don't accept, and they have to turn what they do accept into theirs, and that takes years. And so my role is really a longer term thing. There's this great movie, *The Battle of Algiers*. Have you seen it?

**Margaret** *No, but I've heard it was required viewing for the Black Panthers.*

**Derrick:** It's also required viewing at West Point. It's *the* movie on insurgency and anti-insurgency. And I was thinking about where I would fit into the movie. It's about an insurgency against the French in Algeria, and where I would fit into this movie is that my books would be on the shelves of the people who are doing the fighting. That doesn't mean I don't have other roles; I spent most of the day today fighting a timber harvest plan. But what I'm really trying to do is lay a philosophical and emotional and intellectual groundwork for all of this. When *Listening to the Land* came out, Barry Lopez read the first line: "We are members of the most destructive culture ever to exist," then he held it at arm's length and said, "This is great, somebody is finally saying it." And that's what I do: I finally say the stuff that a lot of people are thinking. And yeah, I see my role the same as Ursula K. Le Guin's in that way. She has one of my favorite lines ever about writing, which is, "Writing is a lot like sex, it's better with two people." It's one thing to write in a journal, and it's another to write for an audi-

**Derrick:** Oh, it was really hard. I would have figured that with 13 books out now, or however many, that it would be easy to get my work published. I've received a boatload of awards and all of that, but it's still not easy. It's obviously easier than it was, because getting published before took years and looked impossible.

My agent sent out the novels to a bunch of publishers and they all disliked them pretty intensely. I got very negative rejection letters. So then I thought, shoot, I'll try really small anarchist presses. I did that with my zoo book [*Thought to Exist in the Wild*]. That was published by a very small press, No Voice Unheard, and they did a great job with it. But I couldn't even find an itty-bitty little press. The itty-bitty presses who thought about it were making really absurd comments. There're sections in my book *Songs of the Dead* that are about how parasites can control the behavior of their hosts, and how that's true for humans too. And one person suggested that I cut all the fiction and make it into a non-fiction book about that.

In my other book I go back and forth in time, and a publisher suggested that I make the book entirely linear and cut out half of it. That book has basically two trajectories. The book is about a person who is a paper revolutionary like me, who talks about revolution but isn't taking up weapons, and she works on toxics in the inner city. One night she's on her way home from work and she gets mugged, and she's fairly combative, and as she's getting mugged, she blurts out, "What's the difference between street thugs and corporate stooges? It makes you such a big man to beat up on me? Why do you think I'm here? I'm here to save kids from cancer." And what she doesn't know is that one of the guys, his little sister died of cancer, and it really pisses him off. Later on he goes and visits his brother in the penitentiary, and his brother says, "You know, she's right. If you take some gunpowder and you set it on fire, all you have is a stink in your house and a burn mark on your table, but if you put that gunpowder behind a bullet, you got something." And his point is direct your anger, don't just spew it at everybody.

So he shows up at her work months and months later and apologizes. It ends up that they kidnapped the CEO of the company that has toxified that part of the city. And she doesn't have a choice. She can tell him to go, in which case she's showing that everything she's ever written is just rhetoric, or she can participate in a capital crime. That's the main story. They wanted me to only keep that, and they wanted me to cut the other story that talks about what happens to her life after that night. I've got them interspersed. I didn't want to make that cut.

And finally I found PM Press. I'm very happy with them so far. They published my interview book [*How Shall I Live My Life?*], and they did my most recent CD [*Now This War Has Two Sides*], and now they're doing these two novels, one of which will be out within a couple of weeks, *Songs of the Dead*.

**Margaret:** *It seems like there's a kind of a stigma against publishing fiction in the radical political scene, and there are people who just think it's frivolous when*

compared to theory, like the people who wanted to cut your book down to just theory.

**Derrick:** I think that the people who think that fiction is frivolous have a really good point, actually. I think the problem isn't with the theorists or the people who would look down their noses at fiction; I think that the problem is with a lot of modern fiction.

A great example of that: I was watching this awful, awful movie a few months ago, called *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*. It's a movie that's based on this memoir. It's a memoir of this guy who has a stroke and when he wakes up after having the stroke he's in the hospital and can only move his left eye. He finally figures out a language he can use, with the help of a nurse, and he then dictates his memoir to this nurse. And he's a horrible person. Before he did this he was the editor of some fashion magazine in Paris, and the whole memoir is incredibly pitying. What he wants to say to his children is, "Now you know what it's like to have a monster for a father." He has nothing to say.

I'm watching this movie, and I'm just hating it, and I'm thinking that it seemed really familiar. And I realized it was basically the plot of the book *Johnny Got His Gun* [by Dalton Trumbo], which is one of the best anti-war books ever written. And that's about a soldier who wakes up in bed and slowly realizes that he's lost his eyes, nose, mouth, ears, arms, legs, he's lost everything. During the book, he figures out how to communicate by pushing his head against the pillow, and he then dictates this extraordinary anti-capitalist manifesto. It's the opposite thing... we have the same plot, but *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* says nothing.

Just last night I was at my mom's watching *Oliver Twist* on Masterpiece Theatre, and Charles Dickens, he was making some extraordinarily powerful points about the poor. And you take Émile Zola, who wrote *Germinal*, a lot of those writers understood that, like Bertolt Brecht said, "Art is not a mirror with which to reflect life, but rather a hammer with which to shape it." And yet one of the big complaints that almost every publisher had about my novels is that I was attempting to make philosophical and political points. Both are about fighting back.

Fiction has really lost its way. If you write fiction that makes important points, then suddenly you're preaching. And having said that, I have to tell you, I've read some really shitty novels by people who had points to say but they weren't good enough at fiction. Those are different skill sets, theorizing and writing fiction. But there are some novelists who are making really good points. You know who is actually writing books about killing those who are killing the natural world? Karl Hiaasen, with his really silly adventure novels. Developers and stuff end up being fed to alligators.

I think that part of the problem is that modern fiction, a lot of it, is meaningless. And I think that that's a huge, huge problem with fiction, and not with the anarchist theorists.

I really like my agent right now. He's great, his politics are very radical obviously. And he doesn't tell me to edit my stuff. I've fired agents before. I had one agent that read the first 70 pages of *Language* and told me that if I took out the social criticism and the family stuff, I'd have a book. I fired her. I've had agents, early on in my career, try to stifle me, try to "steer me towards bigger audiences." Sierra Club didn't take the zoo book because they thought it was too much of a rant. They said that it wouldn't help animals at all.

I think my fiction writing is good, I don't think that that's why it hasn't gotten not accepted anywhere. Part of it is the idea. If you have a book where someone kidnaps and kills a CEO, that's totally different than if you have a book where somebody kidnaps and kills a woman. That's every movie that's on HBO right now, that's what you do.

It's what George Gerber talked about: casting and fate. George Gerber was the TV violence guy; he studied violence from the fifties 'til 2005, when he died. And when people talk about how much violence is on TV, they're citing his studies. I interviewed him, he's a great guy. He said everybody gets his stuff wrong, they always misinterpret him. His problem is not that there's violence on TV, he doesn't care about that, or movies, his problem is that he says that violence is a social relation, and the question is who does what to whom. He studied how many times in movies men commit acts of violence, versus how many times do women commit acts of violence, and who is doing them. What he found, no surprise, is that white males, on film and TV and movies, commit violence with impunity, and if a woman commits an act of violence, then the whole movie has to be about why she would do something so disturbing. But Bruce Willis? Kills somebody in the first three minutes. And that's really important because what he says is, these are stories. I mean, there's this great line by a Scottish balladeer: "If I could write all the ballads, I wouldn't care who wrote the laws." And it's so true because stories are how we learn—we are for better or worse social creatures—and stories are how we learn how to be human beings. And if the stories you see routinely show people like you committing acts of violence and getting away with it, you're going to be different than if stories routinely show you being victimized. That's a really important thing. Why'd I bring that up? What was your question?

**Margaret:** *Impediments...*

**Derrick:** That's one of the things that I think, is that it's distasteful for many people to have a book where a woman, of all people, kills a CEO. People have said, "Oh my god, your books are so violent," but that's not true at all. The body count on my books is much lower than your standard Hollywood movie. The thing I've found really important is that I bring meaning to it. And the problem is, if you put meaning and violence together? Nature writers can say, "Oh, it's so terrible" and philosophers can use big words to say, "Oh, it's so terrible" and

character would die, then I'd just roll up another one. I was never one of those people who would kill themselves when their character died. We were all just like, "Okay I didn't like him anyway, let's roll up another one. God, this one is really stupid and really weak and really not charismatic. Okay I'll send him in to get killed." And one time I was rolling up a character after having yet another one die, and I realized, you know, this is the end. This isn't a big deal for me, but if this character were alive, then this character would be dead. And I suddenly realized that it's the same for me. It's like, okay, I've been given these gifts by the universe, and I'm going to die some day, and I'm not going to get rewards. So far as I know, when I die I'm done, so I need to live my life to the fullest. I need to be what I want to be, to explore those gifts. So that was the lesson it really taught me.

I don't think it taught me anything as an activist. In retrospect, the lessons of *Dungeons & Dragons*, I don't know if it's any better now, they're appalling, they're so pro-civ. So basically, lawful is a good thing, that means you obey the rules. Why are orcs and kobolds the bad guys? All of these various creatures who are just living their lives, what are they called? Ochre jelly?

**Margaret:** *Yeah, and the gelatinous cube.*

**Derrick:** Yeah. It's just hanging out, it's not hurting anybody, and we see anything like that, giant slugs, you gotta kill 'em. You gotta kill everything you see. The lessons were pretty appalling, in retrospect. Another thing I thought is pretty interesting about *Dungeons & Dragons*, I thought it would be a pretty darn good psychological evolution tool. A lot of the people I played with, some of them might be real sadists. When we start playing, they devise all these nasty, extraordinary tortures. It's like, "I guess I understand you a bit better now, don't I?"

**Margaret:** *Have you run into any impediments in publishing because of your status as a radical, of how far you take your words?*

**Derrick:** I think the question is, "Have I ever *not* run into impediments to getting stuff published." Yes, I've run into those impediments. I was actually surprised they published *Endgame*. I'm lucky; no publisher has ever tried to censor me, no publisher has ever tried to take the edge off my work. I've heard so many stories of other writers who have been censored. Of course I'm also going with small publishers who don't give me big advances, but I'm very pleased with my publishers in that way. I don't know if you know this, but the rule in publishing is that the writer has final say over all of the words and the publisher has final say over things like the cover, the title and marketing. So if they were to say, "I want you to cut this," I would say, "I will listen to your arguments," and they always recognize that I have the final say.

**Margaret:** *I've been researching the political associations of a lot of the old writers I used to read, the classics. Finding out that Camus wrote for anarchist papers... and when Sacco and Vanzetti were on trial, all of the literary world spoke up for them. But where is the literary world with Eric McDavid?*

**Derrick:** I have a story about this... I'm not going to name the person, but it's an important story. I was talking to a writer once, who has written very eloquently about protecting certain places and/or creatures. I was talking to this person, who said that he had gotten a call from an environmental organization that wanted him to lend his name in an effort to protect this place or creature he had written about. This was weeks or months before, and when he was talking to me he was furious, he was saying, "I'm a writer, not an activist, and I'm losing my objectivity." And I was so pissed off. That's outrageous. That's the same old thing of *using* the animals or that place and not giving back. And obviously I have spoken out in defense of Eric McDavid and others, and I'm not saying that because, "Oh, I'm so great." I'm saying that because it really pisses me off that other artists don't do that.

**Margaret:** *It seems like the people who actually made the changes in the artistic world were aware of the political nature of everything and, while they might not have been obsessed with politics—although some of them certainly were and that tends to be forgotten—they didn't shy away from them either.*

**Derrick:** One thing a lot of people forget, as I say over and over in *Endgame*, is that all writing is propaganda. Sometimes, for example, I'll go over to my mom's and watch a BBC mystery or something. It's embarrassing that I really like them, because all they are is pro-police-state propaganda. It's all about how cops get it right. That doesn't alter the fact that it's a good story. I get caught up in the story and I'm like, "Oh! Catch the criminals! Oh, wait, I don't want the criminals caught." The point is that, whether a story is political or not, it's political.

If I can make a recommendation—I haven't read this since my twenties, so it might not be as good as I remember—there's an essay that was called "On Moral Fiction" by John Gardner. In there, he talks about exactly what we're talking about, about how previously writers wrote something, and now so often they don't. I mean, you write what you know—like in *Germinal*, it's a very good book. Nihilists don't end up looking good in it, but it's a really good book about the horrible conditions in mines in France. And there's a scene where I just couldn't stop sobbing, about this horse that is taken down into the mine when he's a little foal and then he is never brought up again. And what happens is that he lives his life down in the mine and at some point the mine gets flooded and the horse is desperately trying to get away and can't. The author actually went to mines and walked around in them and that's how he learned that.

Gardner also points out—and this is so true and it makes me sick—that there are so many novels today about being a college professor and being in therapy and fucking students. You know why? Because the fucking author is a college professor who is in therapy who is fucking students. So no wonder a lot of writers don't write about activism: a lot of writers aren't activists.

**Margaret:** *How did you get involved in writing, and specifically in teaching writing?*

**Derrick:** I always wanted to be a writer ever since I was a kid. The thing is, when I was in high school, I went through calculus, and I got accepted with a full ride scholarship to an engineering school. And if you get through calculus in high school and you get a full ride scholarship to an engineering school, then you're insane if you want to go be a writer. I tried to transfer at some point and the registrar at where I wanted to transfer actually said to me: "you have a full ride scholarship and you want to transfer here? Are you insane?" Because when I got out of engineering school, I would have started at 35 or 40k back in 1983. Honestly, at this point I've still never made anything close to 35 or 40k. It's the big cliché, and I'm sure you know this: writing is a great way to make a life and a terrible way to make a living. So if you presume that money is what's important then you'd be an idiot to be a writer. Even though I didn't really like science, didn't like math.

I was miserable in college and I realized I didn't want to wake up when I was 65 and go, "who the hell's life was this?" So I realized that I would do whatever it took to be a writer. Then I spent my twenties... if you're going to look at this from a production standpoint, I spent my twenties doing nothing, if you're going to look at this from a soul standpoint, I spent my twenties getting grounded. But that sounds a lot more hoity-toity than it actually was: what it actually was is that I spent a lot of time sitting by a river, which once again sounds really enlightened and everything but it's not. I sat by the river and then I went home and watched the Cubs. I spent a lot of time doing nothing.

My mom was very supportive of that, but my mom doesn't have any patience for people who are lazy. She just trusted me. How did she know that I was just going to waste 4 or 5 years figuring out who I was as opposed to just being a lazy person who was going to waste my life? Which is not to say that a person has to be productive; I think that it's really important for people to vomit up the effects of their schooling and to teach themselves how to think, to teach themselves how to write, to teach themselves what is important, and to teach themselves how to feel. All of those things are really important and it can take a really long time and I have a lot of patience for that process, in myself and others, and for people spending a lot of time confused. The thing that I don't have patience for is for people who are just sort of... I don't have a lot of patience for laziness. How do you know? I've had some friends that I think obviously have some issues, that they have tremendous talent and they're never

*guage. Because I think that a critique of mediation, an awareness of mediation, and how, yeah, there's barriers between people and your work when they read it, I think that all of that is very important...*

**Derrick:** Right. Well, that's another thing, John Zerzan says if we're sitting in a restaurant and it catches on fire, then it would be nice if one of us said to the other one, "You know, it's on fire, we need to leave." There is a place for language. The thing that helped resolve for me the question of whether language is inherently alienating... I mean, it's a no-brainer. So you two [*indicating my friend and I*] are lovers?

**Margaret:** *Yeah.*

**Derrick:** So if I say, "Lips touching, tongues touching, kissing in the ear, whispering in the ear," then it's different than them happening, and they have a different effect. Obviously words are not actions, and so in that sense they are inherently alienating. I mean, I can write up this really passionate sexy scene, and it's still just ink on paper. Likewise I can write this really horrible scene like the introduction to *Culture of Make Believe*.

One day I was driving and I pulled off the interstate, and there was a stop sign on the offramp. And I suddenly got it. The stop sign doesn't stop your car, the stop sign tells you to stop your car. And so I suddenly understand.

Joseph Campbell said this about the people who literally believe the Bible: "You don't go to a restaurant and eat the menu. The menu is telling you something else, the menu is pointing to something." So as long as we recognize that me saying, "There's a fire over there" is not the fire itself, then there shouldn't be a problem. The problem comes—and this is a real problem in this culture, because people are insane—when we confuse what is real and what is not real, or when other people do, and so they confuse the words for the reality. That's when it becomes a problem. This is part of a much bigger problem. I see this with all the so-called solutions to global warming; they all take industrial civilization and industrial capitalism as a given, and the natural world as secondary. So basically, it's how can we maintain this culture, and it would be nice if we still have a world. But what's primary are those trees out there, the rain. That's what's real, everything else is negotiable. Does that make sense?

**Margaret:** *Yeah. You mention in Endgame that you used to play Dungeons & Dragons. Do you think that fantasy, the creation of imaginary worlds, has played a role in your political/social development? We play D&D, is the reason we ask.*

**Derrick:** One thing, I don't think this answers your question, one thing that I learned didn't have to do with activism. It was an existential question. If my

**Derrick:** I get called an anarchist a lot. I think that's the most accurate way to say it, I get called an anarchist a lot, and I don't mind. Do I self identify as an anarchist? Sometimes. It's a label. Like any other label, I guess I'll use it when it feels right, and I won't use it when it doesn't feel right. I'll tell you, this review I got one time, it's so funny. I don't remember what magazine it was in, someone was attacking me for not being enough of an anarchist. How can you be not enough of an anarchist? Isn't that a contradiction? Do we have rules?

This one anarchist actually told me this joke: "If there's a party, how do you recognize the anarchists? They're the ones all wearing the same uniform." I read a really good book, *History of Anarchism*, and the author took anarchism back to Lao-tzu, back to the cynics in Greece. If I can use his definition... I don't remember his definition. If I can use his lineage of anarchism, I'm down for anarchism. If I go with some of its other manifestations, then I'm probably not. I got interviewed for *Green Anarchy* a few years ago. They started the interview by asking me if I'm a green anarchist. And I said, "You know? I don't give a shit. If you want to call me that that's great, but what I really care about is living in a world that has wild salmon, and living in a world that has no dioxin in a mother's breast milk, a world that has icecaps, whatever, and if that makes me a green anarchist, great, if it makes me not a green anarchist, great." It's the same with anarchism.

I have problems with labels anyway. I mean, it took me years before I'd call myself a writer. People would say, "What are you," and I'd say, "I'm a person." That felt really precious to me. So yeah, I'm a writer, I'm an anarchist, I'm an anarcho-primitivist, whatever you want to call me, whatever, but then I'm a capitalist for that matter; I mean, I sell books, I have a little publishing company. So yeah, I'm a capitalist and damn proud of it. Whatever. It's all just... once again John Zerzan's thought has been very important to me, I like John. Do you know John at all?

**Margaret:** *I don't know him personally.*

**Derrick:** He and I, we've been friends for ten years or something. And for ten years we've been having this great disagreement about the degree to which symbolic representation is always alienating. And it's just, if anarchism consists of conversations like that, then yeah, sure, it's wonderful, respectful, it's the way I wish every disagreement was. Each of us is very respectful of the other's position, and each of us respects the other's work, and we still have some disagreements that we don't hold back on expressing.

**Margaret:** *That was actually my next question, about primitivism and anti-language and mediation. And I was going to say that one of the reasons I feel like more people connect with your work than the other primitivist theory; it doesn't say, by using words that I have to look up in a dictionary, that I can't use lan-*

going to fulfill that talent because they are too lazy to do that work, or they have emotional issues or low self-esteem, any combination.

I remember, an important point came to me when I was 27. I called this friend of mine, and he gave me this lecture. If he had done it sooner it would have bugged the hell out of me but, as it was, it was perfect. He said to me, "You have been given gifts. Your ability to write is a gift. And if the universe gives you gifts and you don't use them in service to your community, then you're not worth shit." And that's where I really fall on the whole laziness line, that if you've got some gifts, you damn well better use 'em, you better repay the universe for giving you those gifts. It's like caterpillars and butterflies: you've gotta go through this period of pupation, and you have to go through this, and that's what my twenties were, this period of pupation where I was becoming no longer the person I was as a teenager and becoming the person I am as an adult. And perhaps that process would have gone faster for me had I been in a functioning community that could have told me that this is the process I was going through as opposed to me just knowing that I was miserable? I mean, I didn't like myself, I didn't like my life, I didn't like anything.

There's a great line by Herman Hesse, in *Demian*: "I wanted only to act according to the promptings that came from my true self, why was that so very difficult?"

Oh I gotta tell you this. I was doing a talk in Los Angeles several years ago. And these parents had brought their 14 year-old daughter, and she was this total fan. It was in this church, and it was this little talk, actually it was more of a discussion than a lecture, and then she started talking about, "What should I do with my life?" I'm not really saying anything, I'm just listening to her talk. This is after the sort of big Q&A and now there's like 15 of us sorta sitting around. This was so great because she was sitting there, and her parents were sitting behind her. And she's just rambling like a 14 year-old would do, and then at one point she says, "Maybe what I should do is find what I love to do, and then do it again."

And then I said, "I'm sorry, I didn't hear what you said, could you say it again?" And then she said it again. And I said, "The acoustics in here are really bad because I still can't hear you. Can you say it again?" And then she said it again. And I said, "God, it's really weird, because I'm still not understanding, can you say it again?" and she said it again. It was great cause I still remember her parents eyes were just shining with tears, and I had her say it again and again... She obviously figured out what was going on pretty quick. But I mean, that's it. Figuring out what you love to do, and then doing it again.

And that's sort of the short version, believe it or not, of how I became a writer.

**Margaret:** *You mentioned that writing is a sort of a gift that you need to use in service of the community...*

**Derrick:** For me, if someone else knows explosives, they should use that. I mean, whatever. That's the thing, I've gotten a bunch of emails from people over the years, it bugs the shit out of me. I've gotten probably ten. Organizers saying, "You know, you've written enough. Now you should organize." I was thinking, "Jesus Christ, I'm not an organizer." That's not my gift. I'm terrible at that. I mean, I'm not really a people person—most writers aren't. If I was social, I wouldn't be a writer. So whatever your gifts are.

**Margaret:** *What do you feel like you can accomplish through your writing to serve your community? Have you seen anything specific and tangible?*

**Derrick:** Well, there's still dams standing, so obviously my work isn't doing what I want. I've gotten bazillions of notes from people, and the most common type of note I get is saying, "I thought I was the only one who was thinking these things, that civilization is unsustainable, and that it's insane, that working in a wage job is insane," or, "I thought I was the only person who thought that zoos are insane. So thank you for letting me know that I'm not alone." And that's really gratifying and that makes me really happy. And I've gotten so many notes from people, geez, I've gotten notes from women who've—men have never done this, oddly enough—I've gotten notes from women who've divorced their abusive husbands they say because of my books. Obviously they were ready for it. There're people who've become activists because of it, there's all sorts of stuff. And that's really great.

The bottom line is, how does it help the land? Does it? I don't know. This is something I say in *Endgame*, I say in my talks, you know nobody's going to give a shit as to what good books we wrote, or whether we did treesits or didn't do treesits, or whether we recycled, or whether we were vegetarians or not vegetarians, or whether the potstickers [which we were eating] were any good, they're not going to care about any of that. What they're going to care about is whether they can breathe the air and drink the water. The land is everything. And so, is my work helping to save the salmon? I don't know. And that's a tremendous source of frustration.

As a writer you are, by definition, abstracted, from the real work. There are layers between you—even when I affect somebody and let them know that they're not alone—there're still those layers.

So what do I want, is your question? What do I want to accomplish?

**Margaret:** *What do you feel like can be accomplished through writing, in the sense of the health of the landbase, etc.?*

**Derrick:** I'm doing a conference, I hate conferences, but I'm doing a conference next week actually, in South Carolina, and it's a conference of nature writing or something. And the reason I'm doing it is because *Orion* published an excerpt

of *Endgame* that really helped jumpstart the book, and they have a lot to do with it, so I'm doing it basically as a favor to them. One of the things I'm going to talk about is... basically, for years, I was going to write an essay called "Why I can't read nature writing," cause I hate most nature writing. One of the reasons I hate it is because I'm not sure that the world needs more descriptions of beautiful places. Look out your fucking back door, ya know? What we *need* is to stop this culture from killing the planet.

I'm writing a book right now with Eric McBay, about shit, about decay, and basically the book is about how this culture has taken shit, which is a beautiful gift to the landbase, and turned it into a toxic thing. In nature, somebody's shit is somebody else's food. There is no waste in nature. You've seen, I'm sure, that there's 6 times as much plastic as phytoplankton in the ocean. This culture's creating these... I mean, how long is this [*points to a plastic water cup*] going to be here, or this [*points to my recorder*]? And I'm not picking on you; I've got a truck, and a computer, and blah blah blah. For crying out loud, how long is this [*grabs the tablecloth*] going to last? I don't know if it's made of polyester or if it's made of cotton. And it's an interesting book because I've always been fascinated by decay; it's really fun, you know, all these fun facts about shit and fungus and everything else. But a problem Eric and I were having with it, one of the things that I've been thinking about a lot as I've been writing this book ... R.D. Laing, in his book *The Politics of Experience* had the best first line ever of any book, which is: "Few books today are forgivable." The whole book is about alienation, how we're so horribly desperately alienated. The point is if your book doesn't start with this alienation as your starting point, and work towards resolving it, insofar as any piece of writing can resolve alienation, which is a big question, then it's not forgivable and you'd be better off with blank pages. Basically in this book, I'm saying that any book that doesn't start from the fact that this culture is killing the planet and work to resolve that is unforgivable. We'd be better off with blank pages.

So what do I want to accomplish with my writing? I want to bring down civilization, I want to stop this culture from killing the planet. And writing is my gift, and writing is my weapon, and if it ends up that writing isn't a good enough weapon I'll have to choose another weapon. Because, and this is what I'm going to say next week, is that so many nature writers forget that writing is a means to an end. Maybe if the planet weren't being killed then we'd all have the luxury of just writing fun little stories, that it doesn't matter if it's a fun little story about a vampire or a fun little story about the beautiful bird out your window. It doesn't matter. Right now we don't have that luxury. And that's a question I think about every day. How does my work help to bring down civilization?

**Margaret:** *What are your associations with anarchism, and would you describe yourself as an anarchist? How did you get interested in it?*