

MYTHMAKERS & LAWBREAKERS

anarchist writers on fiction

part three

ALAN MOORE

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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ALAN MOORE

I first heard of Alan Moore as the author of V for Vendetta, the graphic novel that pits an anarchist hero against a tyrannical British government. And then I heard more and more about him. He transformed D.C. Comic's Swampthing into an eco-warrior. He wrote Watchmen, often considered the finest graphic novel ever written. He rebirthed Steampunk with The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen. He also, by the way, adamantly does not stand by the movies that were filmed of his works (From Hell, V for Vendetta, The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen). But since most of his work in his younger years was for major comics publishers, he owns very little of his own work.

An acquaintance passed along his phone number, and I called him at his home in Britain. He spoke eloquently of politics, history, and the impact of fiction upon our lives.

Margaret: *I'll start with the basics: What are your associations with anarchism? Do you consider yourself an anarchist? How did you first get involved in radical politics?*

Alan: Well I suppose I first got involved in radical politics as a matter of course, during the late 1960s when it was a part of the culture. The counterculture, as we called it then, was very eclectic and all-embracing. It included fashions of dress, styles of music, philosophical positions, and, inevitably, political positions. And although there would be various political leanings coming to the fore from time to time, I suppose that the overall consensus political stand-

point was probably an anarchist one. Although probably back in those days, when I was a very young teenager, I didn't necessarily put it into those terms. I was probably not familiar enough with the concepts of anarchy to actually label myself as such. It was later, as I went into my twenties and started to think about things more seriously that I came to a conclusion that basically the only political standpoint that I could possibly adhere to would be an anarchist one.

It furthermore occurred to me that, basically, anarchy is in fact the only political position that is actually possible. I believe that all other political states are in fact variations or outgrowths of a basic state of anarchy; after all, when you mention the idea of anarchy to most people they will tell you what a bad idea it is because the biggest gang would just take over. Which is pretty much how I see contemporary society. We live in a badly developed anarchist situation in which the biggest gang has taken over and have declared that it is not an anarchist situation—that it is a capitalist or a communist situation. But I tend to think that anarchy is the most natural form of politics for a human being to actually practice. All it means, the word, is no leaders. *An-archon*. No leaders.

And I think that if we actually look at nature without prejudice, we find that this is the state of affairs that usually pertains. I mean, previous naturalists have looked at groups of animals and have said, "Ah, yes, this animal is the alpha male, so he is the leader of the group." Whereas later research tends to suggest that this is simply the researcher projecting his own social visions onto a group of animals, and that if you observe them more closely you will find out that, yes, there is this big tough male that seems to handle most of the fights, but that the most important member of the herd is probably this female at the back that everybody seems to gather around during any conflict. There are other animals within the herd that might have an importance in terms of finding new territory. In fact, the herd does not actually structure itself in terms of hierarchies; every animal seems to have its own position within the herd.

And actually, if you look at most natural human groupings of people, such as a family or a group of friends, you will find that again, we don't have leaders. Unless you're talking about some incredibly rigid Victorian family, there is nobody that could be said to be the leader of the family; everybody has their own function. And it seems to me that anarchy is the state that most naturally obtains when you're talking about ordinary human beings living their lives in a natural way. It's only when you get these fairly alien structures of order that are represented by our major political schools of thought, that you start to get these terrible problems arising—problems regarding our status within the hierarchy, the uncertainties and insecurities that are the result of that. You get these jealousies, these power struggles, which by and large, don't really afflict the rest of the animal kingdom. It seems to me that the idea of leaders is an unnatural one that was probably thought up by a leader at some point in antiquity; leaders have been brutally enforcing that idea ever since, to the point where most people cannot conceive of an alternative.

This is one of the things about anarchy: if we were to take out all the leaders tomorrow, and put them up against a wall and shoot them—and it’s a lovely thought, so let me just dwell on that for a moment before I dismiss it—but if we were to do that, society would probably collapse, because the majority of people have had thousands of years of being conditioned to depend upon leadership from a source outside themselves. That has become a crutch to an awful lot of people, and if you were to simply kick it away, then those people would simply fall over and take society with them. In order for any workable and realistic state of anarchy to be achieved, you will obviously have to educate people—and educate them massively—towards a state where they could actually take responsibility for their own actions and simultaneously be aware that they are acting in a wider group, that they must allow other people within that group to take responsibility for their own actions. Which, on a small scale, as it works in families or in groups of friends, doesn’t seem to be that implausible, but it would take an awful lot of education to get people to think about living their lives in that way. And obviously, no government, no state, is ever going to educate people to the point where the state itself would become irrelevant. So if people are going to be educated to the point where they can take responsibility for their own laws and their own actions and become, to my mind, fully actualized human beings, then it will have to come from some source other than the state or government.

There have been underground traditions, both underground political traditions and underground spiritual traditions. There have been people such as John Bunyan, who spent almost 30 years in prison in nearby Bedford. This is the author of “The Pilgrim’s Progress” who spent nearly 30 years in prison because the spiritual ideas he was espousing were so incendiary. This was a part of a movement; around the seventeenth century in England there were all sorts of strange ideas bubbling to the surface, particularly around the area where I live, in the midlands. You’ve got all of these religions—although they were often considered heretical—which were stating that there was no need for priests, that there was no need for leaders; they were hoping to announce a nation of saints. That everybody would become a saint, and that they would become mechanistic philosophers. People could work all day, as say a tinker, but that in the evening they could stand up and preach the word of the Lord with as much authority as any person in a pulpit. This looks to be a glorious idea, but you can see how it would have terrified the authorities at the time.

And indeed it was during the seventeenth century that, partly fueled by similar ideas, Oliver Cromwell rose up and commenced the British civil war, which eventually led to the beheading of Charles I. I mean it was, in the phrase of one of the best books about the period, “literally a case of the world turned upside down.” There have been these underground traditions, whether they are spiritual or purely political, that have expressed anarchist ideas for centuries, and these days there is even more potential for the dissemination of ideas like

that. With the growth of the internet and the growth of communication in general, these ideas are much harder to suppress. Simply putting John Bunyan in jail for 30 years isn't really going to cut it anymore. Also, the internet does suggest possibilities for throwing off centralized state control.

There was a very interesting piece, a 10 minute television broadcast, made over here by a gentleman from the London School of Economics, a lecturer who looked like the least threatening man that you can imagine. He didn't look like an apocalyptic political firebrand by any means; he looked like and was an accountant and an economist. And yet the actual picture he was painting was quite compelling. He was saying that the only reason that governments are governments is that they control the currency; they don't actually do anything for us that we don't pay for, other than expose us to the threat of foreign wars by their reckless actions. They don't actually really even govern us; all they do is control the currency and rake off the proceeds.

Now in the past, if you wanted to get yourself thrown into jail forever then the best way of going about it would have been not to have molested children or gone on a serial killing spree or something like that, the best way would have been to try to establish your own currency. Because the nature of currency is a kind of magic: these pieces of metal or pieces of paper only have value as long as people believe that they do. If somebody were to introduce another kind of piece of metal or piece of paper, and if people were to start believing in that form of currency more than yours, then all of your wealth would suddenly vanish. So attempts to introduce alternative currencies in the past have been ruthlessly stamped out. And with the internet, that is no longer anywhere near as easy. In fact, a lot of modern companies have rewards schemes; supermarkets run reward schemes that are in certain senses like a form of currency. A lot of companies have schemes in which workers will be paid in credits which can be redeemed from almost anything from a house to a tin of beans at the company store. There are also green economies that are starting up here and there whereby you'll have say, an underprivileged place in England where you have an out-of-work mechanic who wants his house decorated. He will, as an out-of-work mechanic, have accumulated green credits by doing the odd job around the neighborhood—fixing people's cars, stuff like that—and he will be able to spend those credits by getting in touch with an out-of-work decorator who will come and paint his house for him.

Now again, schemes like this are increasingly difficult to control, and what this lecturer from the London School of Economics was saying is that in the future we would have to be prepared for a situation in which we have firstly, no currency, and secondly, as a result of that, no government. So there are ways in which technology itself and the ways in which we respond to technology—the ways in which we adapt our culture and our way of living to accommodate breakthroughs and movements in technology—*might* give us a way to move around government. To evolve around government to a point where such a

thing is no longer necessary or desirable. That is perhaps an optimistic vision, but it's one of the only realistic ways I can see it happening.

I don't believe that a violent revolution is ever going to work, simply on the grounds that it never has in the past. I mean, speaking as a resident of Northampton, during the English civil war we backed Cromwell—we provided all the boots for his army—and we were a center of antiroyalist sentiment. Incidentally, we provided all the boots to the Confederates as well, so obviously we know how to pick a winner. Cromwell's revolution? I guess it succeeded. The king was beheaded, which was quite early in the day for beheading; amongst the European monarchy, I think we can claim to have kicked off that trend. But give it another ten years; as it turned out, Cromwell himself was a monster. He was every bit the monster that Charles I had been. In some ways he was worse. When Cromwell died, the restoration happened. Charles II came to power and was so pissed off with the people of Northampton that he pulled down our castle. And the status quo was restored. I really don't think that a violent revolution is ever going to provide a long-term solution to the problems of the ordinary person. I think that is something that we had best handle ourselves, and which we are most likely to achieve by the simple evolution of western society. But that might take quite a while, and whether we have that amount of time is, of course, open to debate.

So I suppose that those are my principal thoughts upon anarchy. They've been with me for a long time. Way back in the early eighties, when I was first kicking off writing *V for Vendetta* for the English magazine *Warrior*, the story was very much a result of me actually sitting down and thinking about what the real extreme poles of politics were. Because it struck me that simple capitalism and communism were not the two poles around which the whole of political thinking revolved. It struck me that two much more representative extremes were to be found in fascism and anarchy.

Fascism is a complete abdication of personal responsibility. You are surrendering all responsibility for your own actions to the state in the belief that in unity there is strength, which was the definition of fascism represented by the original Roman symbol of the bundle of bound twigs. Yes, it is a very persuasive argument: "In unity there is strength." But inevitably people tend to come to a conclusion that the bundle of bound twigs will be much stronger if all the twigs are of a uniform size and shape, if there aren't any oddly shaped or bent twigs that are disturbing the bundle. So it goes from "in unity there is strength" to "in uniformity there is strength," and from there it proceeds to the excesses of fascism as we've seen them exercised throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.

Now anarchy, on the other hand, is almost starting from the principle that "in diversity, there is strength," which makes much more sense from the point of view of looking at the natural world. Nature, and the forces of evolution—if you happen to be living in a country where they still believe in the forces of

evolution, of course—did not really see fit to follow that “in unity and in uniformity there is strength” idea. If you want to talk about successful species, then you’re talking about bats and beetles; there are thousands of different varieties of bat and beetle. Certain sorts of tree and bush have diversified so splendidly that there are now thousands of examples of this basic species. Now you contrast that to something like horses or humans, where there’s one basic type of human, and two maybe three basic types of horses. In terms of the evolutionary tree, we are very bare, denuded branches. The whole program of evolution seems to be to diversify, because in diversity there is strength.

And if you apply that on a social level, then you get something like anarchy. Everybody is recognized as having their own abilities, their own particular agendas, and everybody has their own need to work cooperatively with other people. So it’s conceivable that the same kind of circumstances that obtain in a small human grouping, like a family or like a collection of friends, could be made to obtain in a wider human grouping like a civilization.

So I suppose those are pretty much my thoughts at the moment upon anarchy. Although of course with anarchy, it’s a fairly shifting commodity, so if you ask me tomorrow I might have a different idea.

Margaret: *In “writing for comics” you write about how stories can have relevance to the world around us, how stories can be “useful” in some way. How do you think that stories can be useful? And how do politics inform your work?*

Alan: Well, I think that stories are probably more than just useful; they are probably vital. I think that if you actually examine the relationship between real life and fiction, you’ll find that we most often predicate our real lives upon fictions that we have applied from somewhere. From our earliest days in the caves I’m certain we have, when assembling our own personalities, tried to borrow qualities—perhaps from real people that we admire, but as often as not from some completely mythical person, some god or some hero, some character from a storybook. Whether this is a good idea or not, this tends to be what we do. The way that we talk, the way that we act, the way that we behave, we’re probably taking our example from some fiction or prototype. Even if it’s a real person who’s inspiring us, it may be that *they* were partly inspired by fictional examples. And given that, it is quite easy to see that in a sense, our entire lives—individually or as a culture—are a kind of narrative.

It’s a kind of fiction, it is not a reality in the sense that it is something concrete and fixed; we constantly fictionalize our own experience. We edit our own experience. There are bits of it that we simply misremember, and there are bits of it that we deliberately edit out because they’re not of interest to us or perhaps they show us in a bad light. So we’re constantly revising, both as individuals and as nations, our own past. We’re turning it moment by moment into a kind of fiction, that is the way that we assemble our daily reality. We are

not experiencing reality directly, we are simply experiencing our perception of reality. All of these signals pulsing down optic nerves, and in the tympanums of our ears, from those we compose, moment by moment, our view of reality. And inevitably, because people's perceptions are different, and the constructions that people put on things are different, then there is no such thing as a cold, objective reality that is solid and fixed and not open to interpretation. Inevitably, we are to some extent creating a fiction every second of our lives, the fiction of who we are, the fiction of what our lives are about, the meanings that we give to things.

So to some degree, stories are at the absolute center of human existence. Sometimes to disastrous effect; if you think about how various ancient religious stories—that may have been intended at the time as no more than fables—have led to so many devastating wars up to and including the present day. Obviously there are some occasions when the fictions that we base our lives upon lead us into some terrifying territory. So yes, I think that stories have a great part to play, in some ways more than the development of laws or the development of any other kind of sociological marker. I think that it is the development of our fictions and the development of our stories that tend to be the real measure of our progress. I tend to think that when we look back at culture, we're generally looking at art as the measure of the high points of our culture. We're not looking at war, or the major, benign political events. We're generally looking at cultural high points, such as a story.

As to how politics relate to the storytelling process, I'd say that it's probably in the same way that politics relate to everything. I mean, as the old feminist maxim used to go, "the personal is the political." We don't really live in an existence where the different aspects of our society are compartmentalized in the way that they are in bookshops. In a bookshop, you'll have a section that is about history, that is about politics, that is about the contemporary living, or the environment, or modern thinking, modern attitudes. All of these things are political. All of these things are *not* compartmentalized; they're all mixed up together. And I think that inevitably there is going to be a political element in everything that we do or don't do. In everything we believe, or do not believe.

I mean, in terms of politics I think that it's important to remember what the word actually means. Politics sometimes sells itself as having an ethical dimension, as if there was good politics and bad politics. As far as I understand it, the word actually has the same root as the word polite. It is the art of conveying information in a politic way, in a way that will be discrete and diplomatic and will offend the least people. And basically we're talking about spin. Rather than being purely a late twentieth, early twenty-first century term, it's obvious that politics have always been nothing but spin. But, that said, it is the system which is interwoven with our everyday lives, so every aspect our lives is bound to have a political element, including writing fiction.

I suppose any form of art can be said to be propaganda for a state of mind.

Inevitably, if you are creating a painting, or writing a story, you are making propaganda, in a sense, for the way that you feel, the way that you think, the way that you see the world. You are trying to express your own view of reality and existence, and that is inevitably going to be a political action—especially if your view of existence is too far removed from the mainstream view of existence. Which is how an awful lot of writers have gotten into terrible trouble in the past.

Margaret: *Have you run into any problems with your publishers, owing to your radical politics?*

Alan: Well, no, surprisingly. I largely got into comics under the influence of the American underground comics; that was probably the background that I was coming from, a kind of adulation of American underground culture, including its comic strips. Now, that background was always very, very political. So right from the start there would probably always be some politically satirical element, at least from time to time. When it was necessary, or felt right for the story, there would be some satirical political element creeping in to my work right from the earliest days. A lot of the very early little short stories I did for *2000AD*, little twist-ending science-fiction tales. When it was possible I would try to get some kind of political moral, or simply moral, into stories like that. Simply because it made them better stories, and it made me feel better about writing them because I was expressing my own beliefs.

Now because those stories were popular, because they sold more comics, I never had any problem at all. Even if the people publishing the books didn't share my beliefs or politics—and in most instances their politics would have been 180 degrees away from mine—they at least understood their own sales figures. And they seemed to be able to live with that, with publishing views to which they themselves they did not subscribe, so long as the readers were buying the books in large numbers. They are prepared to forgive you anything if you're making enough money for them. I think that's the general message that I've taken from my career in comics: that if you're good enough, if you're popular enough, if you're making enough money, then they will quite cheerfully allow you to use their publishing facilities to disseminate ideas that perhaps are very, very radical. Perhaps even in some contexts, potentially dangerous. This is the beauty of capitalism: there is an inherent greed that is more concerned with raking in the money than in whatever message might be being circulated. So no, I've never really had any problems with that.

Margaret: *Can you point to any effect that your stories have had on the world?*

Alan: I can't think of many *positive* ones. I would like to think that some of my work has opened up people's thinking about certain areas. On a very primi-

tive level, it would be nice to think that people thought a little bit differently about the comics medium as a result of my work, and saw greater possibility in it. And realized what a useful tool for disseminating information it was. That would be an accomplishment. That would have added a very useful implement to the arsenal of people who are seeking social change, because comics can be an incredibly useful tool in that regard. I'd also like to think that perhaps, on a higher level, that some of my work has the potential to radically change enough people's ideas upon a subject. To perhaps, eventually, decades after my own death, affect some kind of minor change in the way that people see and organize society. Some of my magical work that I've done is an attempt to get people to see reality and it's possibilities in a different light. I'd like to think that that might have some kind of impact eventually. I'd like to think that *Lost Girls*, with its attempt to rehabilitate the whole notion of pornography, might have some benign effects. That people will be able to potentially come up with a form of pornography which is not ugly, which is intelligent, and which potentially makes pornography into a kind of beautiful, welcoming arena in which our most closely guarded sexual secrets can be discussed in an open and healthy way. Where our shameful fantasies are not left to fester and to turn into something monstrous in the dark inside us. It would be nice to think that maybe stuff like *Lost Girls* and the magical material might have the potential to actually change the way people think.

With relation to the magic, I can remember one of the last conversations I had with my very dear and much missed friend, the writer Kathy Acker. This was very soon after I had just become interested and involved with magic. I was saying to her how the way I was then seeing things was that basically magic was about the last and best bastion of revolution. The political revolution, the sexual revolution, these things had their part and had their limits, whereas the idea of a magical revolution would revolve around actually changing people's consciousnesses, which is to say, actually changing the nature of perceived reality. Kathy agreed with that completely—it sort of followed on some of her own experiences—and I still think that that is true. In some ways, magic is the most political of all of the areas that I'm involved with.

For example, we were talking earlier—well *I* was talking earlier—about anarchy and fascism being the two poles of politics. On one hand you've got fascism, with the bound bundle of twigs, the idea that in unity and uniformity there is strength; on the other you have anarchy, which is completely determined by the individual, and where the individual determines his or her own life. Now if you move that into the spiritual domain, then in religion, I find very much the spiritual equivalent of fascism. The word "religion" comes from the root word *ligare*, which is the same root word as ligature, and ligament, and basically means "bound together in one belief." It's basically the same as the idea behind fascism; there's not even necessarily a spiritual component it. Everything from the Republican Party to the Girl Guides could be seen as a reli-

gion, in that they are bound together in one belief. So to me, like I said, religion becomes very much the spiritual equivalent of fascism. And by the same token, magic becomes the spiritual equivalent of anarchy, in that it is purely about self-determination, with the magician simply a human being writ large, and in more dramatic terms, standing at the center of his or her own universe. Which, I think, is a kind of a spiritual statement of the basic anarchist position. I find an awful lot in common between anarchist politics and the pursuit of magic, that there's a great sympathy there.

Margaret: *Have you heard of the A for Anarchy project that happened in New York City with the release of the movie version of V for Vendetta?*

Alan: No I haven't, please go on, inform me.

Margaret: *Some anarchist activist types started tabling outside of the movie showings with information about how Hollywood had taken the politics out of the movie.*

Alan: Ah, now that is fantastic, that is really good to hear, because that's one of the things that had distressed me. What had originally been a straightforward battle of ideas between anarchy and fascism had been turned into a kind of ham-fisted parable of 9-11 and the war against terror, in which the words anarchy and fascism appear nowhere. I mean, at the time I was thinking: look, if they wanted to protest about George Bush and the way that American society is going since 9-11—which would completely understandable—then why don't they do what I did back in the 1980s when I didn't like the way that England was going under Margaret Thatcher, which is to do a story in my own country, that was clearly about events that were happening right then in my own country, and kind of make it obvious that that's what you're talking about. It struck me that for Hollywood to make *V for Vendetta*, it was a way for thwarted and impotent American liberals to feel that they were making some kind of statement about how pissed off they were with the current situation without really risking anything. It's all set in England, which I think that probably, in *most* American eyes, is kind of a fairytale kingdom where we still perhaps have giants. It doesn't really exist; it might as well be in the Land of Oz for most Americans. So you can set your political parable in this fantasy environment called England, and then you can vent your spleen against George Bush and the neo-conservatives. Those were my feelings, and I must admit those are completely based upon not having seen the film even once, but having read a certain amount of the screenplay. That was enough.

But that's really interesting about the A for Anarchy demonstrations. That's fantastic. 

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—Alan Moore

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