

# MYTHMAKERS & LAWBREAKERS

anarchist writers on fiction

part five

## PROFESSOR CALAMITY

*of the Catastraphone Orchestra*

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](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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# PROFESSOR CALAMITY

## *of the Catastraphone Orchestra*

*Professor Calamity is a writer who collaborates with his mechanical band The Catastraphone Orchestra to write steampunk fiction & theory and with The Curious George Brigade to write anarchist theory. The former are perhaps best known for their fictional seasonals that appear in SteamPunk Magazine, the latter for their excellent non-fiction book Anarchy In the Age of Dinosaurs. As one of his two editors for SteamPunk Magazine, it wasn't particularly hard to track him down, but his opinions on the subject matter at hand were quite invigorating.*

**Margaret:** *How did you first come into fiction writing?*

**Calamity:** I think I've always written fiction, since I was a child. I was always interested in telling my own stories; I started by telling stories about the movies I saw in posters. I remember clearly, when I was about six, my father was out on a prolonged strike and we were very poor. We were receiving government cheese, bags of powdered milk, and a sack of groceries from the union HQ every week. My brother and I had always loved movies and would go every Satur-

day to a run-down theater (an old opera house actually) that showed hammer films and other “cheapies” on weekend matinées and seventies pornos in the evenings. While my father was on strike we couldn’t go to the movies obviously, so I would make up stories for my brother and our friends (their parents were on strike also). I wrote a few of them down and a next-door neighbor drew some pictures to go along with it.

I guess I always found the writing experience to be collaborative, despite the myth of the lonely writer and the typewriter. In school I loved writing fiction because it was a chance to escape from the confines of rural Wisconsin and explore places and ideas that were alien to the conservative community I grew up in. I never wrote for myself (another writer myth I never bought into); I was always writing for my friends, stories I liked but also things that they might enjoy. Sometimes three or four of us would get together after high school and smoke stolen cigarettes, drink warm beer, and write for hours on various projects. We would take each other’s characters, ideas, and whatnot and just write with and about them. It gave us a sense of freedom. It wasn’t about ego, capital-A art, exorcising personal demons, or any of that jazz. It was just fun to see where we could take ideas and characters. In college I took some creative writing classes but hated it. I hated the egos and the pretentiousness. I wanted to tell stories and share ideas, not compete to see who was the most clever or well-read. After graduate school, I took my still-wet anthropology degree and went to Bulgaria to live in a Roma (gypsy) ghetto. I went with a bunch of other young writers, and as Bulgaria was lurching from totalitarian communism to totalitarian capitalism, we drank plum brandy and wrote plays. There was a sort of craziness during that period, but it was very productive and was probably the period during which I spent the most time writing fiction. Now I have less time.

**Margaret:** *What about politics? How did you first get interested in anarchism?*

**Calamity:** In high school I was a Marxist. I wore a black boiler suit every day with a hammer & sickle pin in my wool cap and I had a smug-looking Marx hanging in my locker. Needless to say, I was the only Marxist in my small school. It wasn’t until I met other communists in college that I saw how fuckin’ authoritarian they were. I found some books by Emma Goldman and Hakim Bey and started getting into the idea of anarchy. I met the Church of Anarchy folks in Madison, Wisconsin and did some political work with them. We started a small collective called “Some Madison Anarchists.” That was 19 years ago, and the funny thing is we are all still anarchists, working in different parts of the country, doing political projects.

**Margaret:** *How do you think that being an anarchist affects your writing style? You say that you write collectively. Can you talk a bit about that?*

**Calamity:** I only write using a collective approach. This takes many different forms, depending on the individuals I am working with. I write non-fiction with the Curious George Brigade and we do it by arguing about every line and having long discussions about every topic before we start hitting the keyboard. When I write fiction, we usually talk first about the ideas and characters. We verbally hash out the story and then huddle around the computer and take turns typing. Someone not from the group then usually reads it and does minor edits and then we get together and talk about it in some detail. The writing group may go back and re-write bits of it. Sometimes I will write whole chapters and then a group will meet to discuss it and offer major edits and changes. Someone else will rewrite the entire chapter and then it gets “filtered” again. It’s a consensus process and you have to have pretty thick skin to go through it. You have to give up ownership and see it as a real collaboration. It’s funny—in many ways the collaborative process can be as creative as the actual wordsmithing and writing. I hate editing, but in a group it’s a less grating process. Others despise doing dialog and so on; we try to compliment each other. You have to be able to laugh to make it work, even when you’re writing serious or tragic stuff.

**Margaret:** *How about vice-versa? Do you think your love of fiction affects your politics at all?*

**Calamity:** I don’t trust political people who don’t appreciate fiction. Too much of our politics, even anarchist politics, lacks imagination. The problems are so numbing in their complexity and scope that we *need* to be able to draw upon the most imaginative solutions possible to have any chance. I also believe that fiction tends to be more effective propaganda for the extreme left than Noam Chomsky-esque critiques. So much of the far left political writing lacks a heart; it’s so cerebral now. I feel like the anarchists of the past had more heart than many of my comrades today. Anarchists may be smarter than they were in the past, but they miss the human connections that can make our isolated scene a real movement.

**Margaret:** *It comes up a lot, that at any given point protests or anarchism or whatever are stagnant, lack imagination... I suppose that fiction is a good venue to explore possibilities. But maybe it’s more than that, or maybe it’s just a way for individuals to develop their own creativity?*

**Calamity:** Fiction has had and will continue to have an important role to play in radical politics. One can look at *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *The Grapes of Wrath* [editor’s note: this book first turned me on to politics], *The Jungle*, *The Monkeywrench Gang*, and the works of Dickens. That’s just a short list of how fiction can impact real politics. Fiction can speak to the heart, something that’s much needed for anarchist struggles. We’re talking about a radical change, not just

in economic terms but also in how we relate to each other and the world. I would think fiction would be better at articulating this than non-fiction. It is not surprising to me that totalitarian regimes like the Nazis, Italian Fascists, Bolsheviks, etc. first ban (and then burn) fiction works as dangerous. Fiction has a strange power to move people and “stick” with them.

***Margaret:** What, if anything, do you hope to accomplish through writing, particularly fictional stories?*

**Calamity:** I hope to accomplish the liberation of my brothers and sisters and the utter destruction of authority. Failing that, I hope to tell a darn good story that isn't too tidy. I like ambiguity; not the clever post-modern obscurantism, but the messy everyday ambiguity we all experience. My stuff is too dark probably to be considered inspiring, though. Someday I'd like to inspire, but it would have to be honest.

***Margaret:** I suppose your work does have a fairly dark tone, often very fatalistic or nihilistic. Do you think that mirrors how you see the political situation? Or is it a reflection of something else?*

**Calamity:** I think the world we live in is pretty bleak (though I am pretty upbeat in person). I've always been attracted to characters living in very bleak times, how they're shaped by those times yet still resist. To me the history of resistance isn't overly heroic or something to wish for, but a necessity. A necessity that can be quite dark. I guess I'm just very skeptical of Pollyanna-ish heroism. If it were easy it wouldn't be called “struggle.” The fact is that many in the resistance will become lost, their lives will not be great adventures and no one will write folk songs about them, yet they continue. That's what interests me. I think of Winston in *1984*, who is a nobody and ends tragically, but is real and is someone we can identify with. I feel fiction should present some human truths and the truth is that most of us will *not* succeed even if we are smart and struggle hard, but that doesn't diminish our cause. In a sense, it's optimistic to think that people will stand up and fight back even when they are going to lose. That's something that is lost in most American fiction.

***Margaret:** You've helped organize the NYC anarchist bookfairs. What are your feelings about these events? What do you hope see come out of them?*

**Calamity:** Again, I am shocked by the lack of imagination at these events. It's like nearly any other subculture trade show. I go because I like the people and out of some warped sense of duty to support any anarchist project, but I just can't see paying for a table to sell goods about overthrowing capitalism. Yeah, I know we're all hypocrites but I'm not sure we should be so unashamed about it.

So much of our hypocrisy seems to be simply a reflection of our lack of creativity rather than the result of some deep-seated, inescapable paradox.

**Margaret:** *What do you think can be done to reinvent the radical bookfair model?*

**Calamity:** Everything is possible. We could have fictional potlatches. We could hide books in the children's sections of libraries. We could have around-the-clock readings by authors on soapboxes. The money we spend on renting a hall could be spent on a renting a copy machine and people could scam paper and just copy what they want. What about trade for books? What if people stenciled a favorite line or title across the city in exchange for the book they wanted? In fact, what if that was the only way you could get the book? Bookfairs unfortunately achieve an interesting paradox of making books both too expensive and devaluing them. Because of the lack of money in our scenes, the books are often too expensive to take a chance on buying something you wouldn't normally. This leads to an unconscious ghettoization of our reading, since we're only reading things we think we'll enjoy. We're just rereading the same authors, publishers, and whatnot. That's why I like magazines, because there's a hodgepodge of stuff and people actually read stuff they might not ever pick up off a table or plop twelve bucks down for. So bookfairs make books expensive (not any cheaper than buying them online or at a store) and thus we move from a culture of abundance to one of parochial scarcity, yet at the same time they reduce the actual value of the ideas. Most radical authors I know say they write not for money, but to create change. If that's true, then we should be trading our books for change... not pocket change. If you want my book, plant some tomatoes in the boulevard or burn an SUV. That would be of real value to me, not some bullshit royalty. I am sure there are a million other things that could be done to change how we relate to distributing books and writings. 🇺🇸

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