

MYTHMAKERS & LAWBREAKERS

anarchist writers on fiction

part seven

LEWIS SHINER

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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LEWIS SHINER

Lewis Shiner writes books that don't sell. They're published by reputable presses. They're finalists and winners of awards. They're earnest and lovely. He is often considered one of the pioneers of cyberpunk. And yet, none of his six novels are in print. In some ways, he's a case study in how a hard-working, capable, dedicated writer can't necessarily make a living at the trade.

*For the anarchist, perhaps his most interesting work is *Slam*, a novelization of Bob Black's famous essay "The Abolition of Work." He's put much of his work, including his newest novel, *Black & White*, online for free download from his Fiction Liberation Front website: WWW.FICTIONLIBERATIONFRONT.NET.*

I got a chance to read some of his work—most of it can still be found—and talk to him about anarchy, genre fiction, the Wobblies, and why you should be a patron of your own art.

Margaret: *So the main idea that I'm talking to authors about is the intersection between anarchism and fiction, about what kind of role fiction takes in anarchist struggle, and about what kind of influence anarchist ideas have on our fiction.*

Lewis: In thinking about how to answer this, the first place I get stuck is figuring out What Anarchy Means to Me. I mean, we all can sort of point to some of the same things—the WTO demonstrations in Seattle, skaters in circle-A T-shirts, the Sex Pistols—and say “that’s anarchy.” But what do we really mean by that?

The dictionary definition talks about lawlessness and the absence of governmental authority—but in all seriousness, that’s what happening to the entire world right now as corporations rape and pillage the planet, committing one heinous crime after another with no accountability, and government stands by and holds their coats. Clearly that’s not what we’re talking about. Defiance of authority in the name of individual freedom could describe the nutcases in the Libertarian Party who say that the solution to violence is to arm everybody, and the good guys will just gun the bad guys down as soon as they start any trouble. I hope that’s not what we’re talking about either.

So I guess for me anarchy is the defiant gesture in the face of overwhelming authority, in defense of the compassionate human spirit. And we need that now more than we ever have. You can’t change things through politics—the political process just ratifies the reigning ideas of the culture. Right now our culture is dominated by hate and greed and fear. Even the so-called “progressive” candidates are terrified of being seen as “soft” on terror. In order to get meaningful political change, you have change the culture. Art is one of the few things that can do that. The more that art can show positive images of defiance and rebellion against our culture of greed, the more chance we stand of making changes in the real world.

Margaret: *One thing that others have brought up is that sometimes fiction is a good way to get across theoretical ideas without resorting to theory. It seems like your novel Slam does that. On one level, it was kind of like Bob Black’s essay “The Abolition of Work,” in novel form...*

Lewis: I absolutely and consciously wanted to set up a laboratory where I could turn Black’s ideas loose and see how they would play out in that artificial world. There was a very interesting novel called *The End of Mr. Y* by Scarlett Thomas that deals with thought experiments and, by implication, the idea that the novel itself is a thought experiment. My goal in my writing, at least at the moment, is to subvert the capitalist mindset. Any and all ideas about how to do that, and what comes after, are extremely welcome. Anarchists are among the few people actively pursuing that.

Margaret: *What are your associations with anarchism?*

Lewis: Well, as I said when we first discussed doing this interview, I don’t hold much claim to being an anarchist myself. I have a day job. I own a lot of stuff

(mostly books). I don't hide my political opinions, but I'm not in the street protesting either—well, not lately, anyway. It's a question of where I think I can do the most good. And I believe that using my writing for culture change is the most effective thing I can do toward bringing down the system. And as I said above, I look to anarchists for inspiration, for those gestures of defiance that I can use in my work.

Margaret: *For me, at least, anarchism and/or “being an anarchist” is a matter of self-identification. If you believe that humans would be better off organized horizontally than hierarchically, you're an anarchist (or an autonomist, or whatever). Of course, I know plenty of people, anarchist and otherwise, who would take issue with that definition. But I certainly don't think the protest movement (which I suppose I would say that I'm a part of) has any particular reason to claim that it holds the secret of how to become an anarchist. It has a lot more to do with how we treat each other on a personal level, anyhow.*

Lewis: It's funny—in thinking about this, I finally decided that I'm just reluctant to identify myself with any group or label, whether it's cyberpunk or science fiction writer or anarchist. Maybe that's the surest sign that I *am* an anarchist. I like the idea of horizontal rather than hierarchical arrangements, and I've certainly always had problems with authority in whatever guise, whether it was parents, teachers, bosses, cops, or elected officials.

Margaret: *Speaking of cyberpunk, in the eighties you saw a literary movement you accidentally helped found turn into a cliché, a commodity. What do you think that you had hoped for out of cyberpunk? Do you think its descent into formulaic writing was inevitable?*

Lewis: I never really hoped for anything from cyberpunk. I was very grateful for the publicity, but I never really fit in. I wrote one novel, *Frontera*, that fit the mold, and I certainly enjoyed a lot of the work that people like Gibson and Sterling and Rucker and Shirley were doing. But after that I was off to other stuff.

And yeah, I think it's inevitable that if a certain perceived movement becomes successful, it's going to get commodified and people are going to try to jump on the bandwagon. And cyberpunk, like magical realism, had the misfortune of being easy to imitate. Mirrorshades and implant wetware in the one, butterflies and ghosts in the other.

Margaret: *See, this is frightening to me because I work on SteamPunk Magazine and identify with steampunk on aesthetic, political, and social levels. The biggest problem with that has become... yeah... airships and brass goggles. Mainstream culture is picking up on the most surface level elements and has run with*

them. Hell, the same thing happened to punk and its anarchism: suddenly, punk was just about the middle finger, about spray-painted circle-A's. I even like airships and tophats and spraypaint and saying "fuck you" to authority, but somehow the mainstream world always picks up on the least threatening elements of this or that culture.

Lewis: Well, that's society's job, isn't it? To defuse the real threat, on the one hand, and inflate the fake threat on the other? To turn the Black Power movement of the sixties into a cartoon of Afros and raised fists at the same time that it continues to propagate the useful (to bigots) myth that society has to protect white women from black men? To keep pushing the stereotype of the stoned hippie in bell-bottoms and peace symbol at the same time that it terrifies parents that their kids might try marijuana? Michael Moore's *Bowling For Columbine* showed how clearly the current power structure uses fear to manipulate people—and sell them a lot of useless crap. The medical-pharmaceutical-insurance complex is probably the worst, with the military not far behind. Where would Bush have been without 9/11? If there had been no 9/11 he would have had to invent one.

Margaret: *You've mentioned that you're a dues-paying member of the IWW [Industrial Workers of the World—a radical labor union]. How did you first get involved in the Wobblies?*

Lewis: I was a huge fan of Steinbeck in high school, and I loved *The Grapes of Wrath* (and *In Dubious Battle* before that)—speaking of the intersection between anarchism and fiction. So that was where I first heard of the Wobblies. What got me to sign on was a 2005 book called *Wobblies!*, which was a kind of cartoon history of the union. I hadn't even realized they were still around. It was a very effective piece of propaganda, and played into a lot of my existing prejudices—I always knew there was something wrong with the AFL-CIO, for example. The idea of one big union made total sense to me, so I realized I needed to walk it like I talked it.

Margaret: *What has it been like working with mainstream publishers? One of the criticisms you seemed to get a lot for your comic *The Hacker Files*, published by DC comics, was that people disagreed with the political thoughts of the radical protagonist. I have to say, I was hooked by the third page, when Jack Marshall [the protagonist] wore his circle-A shirt to work at the Pentagon.*

Lewis: *The Hacker Files* had a lot of disappointments. For one thing, I love Tom Sutton's art, and I grew to love the man himself in working with him, but he was never a fan favorite. That meant the book was struggling from the outset. I don't like costumed superheroes, and I was forced to use them to try to help

sales—but I couldn't help making fun of them, which annoyed the audience I was supposed to be attracting. I can't say how much Marshall's radicalism hurt sales, but to me that was absolutely the heart of the book, so there was never a question about backing down on that. My editor was totally supportive of the political stance of the series, and he was only concerned, as I was, about trying to get it to as many readers as possible.

I like working in comics, but I don't honestly feel like I've done my best work there. I seem to think more in terms of novels than I do visual media like comics or film.

All my novels before the current one were published by mainstream publishers, but that had no effect on the content. I never made any changes that I didn't agree with, and I never sold any of my books until I was at least well into the second draft. The reason I'm not with a mainstream publisher right now is economics, plain and simple. My books have never sold well, and after five commercial failures, they all gave up on me. Fortunately the guy who runs Subterranean Press, a good-sized independent publisher, is a big fan of my work, and he is willing to give me a home.

Margaret: *Right now it's in the news that DC Comics is suing a charity auction... some comicbook artists got together to sell their art for cancer patients, and DC is suing them for selling drawings of the characters they own. At least with mainstream-published novels, you still own your characters and work, right?*

Lewis: Sure, I own the characters from my novels and stories—unless I sell them to the movies or TV. And DC and Marvel, at least when I was working for them, were fine with creator-owned projects. The problem is, if you don't sell to the movies you don't make any money. If you play in your own comics sandbox and not the continuity sandbox, you also limit your chance to make a living at it.


This brings up an important point, I think, which is the difficulty of making a living as an artist these days. I think it's harder than it's ever been in history. Part of it is what I call the blockbuster effect. It's the idea that rather than make 100 movies for a million dollars each that would appeal to a wide range of audiences, Hollywood would rather make one movie for 100 million that tries to please everybody. But in doing so they no longer serve people who want intellectual fare or people who don't want to see every problem solved through extreme violence. This same attitude has spread to comics and book publishing as well.

The other piece of the puzzle is the Internet, which has given people the idea that all art should be free. I can understand that people want to cut out the parasitic corporations that make ridiculous profits on art, but at the same time they're guaranteeing that artists don't get paid either. It seems to be okay for artists to give away their work, even though nobody is giving away food or shelter or medical care. So how is that fair?

I did it anyway—I started Fiction Liberation Front, (www.fictionliberationfront.net) where I'm slowly putting all my work on the internet for free download. But I do wonder how this is going to come back to me in terms of anything more than good will. I've talked to some entrepreneur types who are supposed to have answers, but for them it always comes back to sponsorship. So in order for an artist to make a living, you have to hustle up a sponsor. But that doesn't work for me. Even if the sponsor put no strings at all on my content, I am still not going shill for somebody selling SUVs or pharmaceuticals or dead cows. So I have a day job so I can sponsor myself.

Margaret: *Your novel Slam immediately gripped me and I read through it in one long session, something I haven't done much since I was a kid. You're clearly a competent writer. What do you think led to your commercial failure? Pure bad luck? Your away-from-center politics?*

Lewis: Well, first off, I'm glad you liked the book. I don't think it's the politics explicitly. It may hurt me that ever since my first novel I have refused to solve the conflicts in my novels through violence (other than violence against property, as in *Slam*). It may hurt me that I don't seem to be able to do the same thing twice. My novels are all in different categories—though it seems to me that if you like one of them, you'll probably like the others.

The only thing I can do is continue to write the sort of novels I want to read, and do the best work I can. Eventually something may click with a wider audience. If not, I'll still have a body of work that I'm proud of. 

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defiant gesture in the
face of overwhelming
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And we need that now more
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—Lewis Shiner

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