

MYTHMAKERS & LAWBREAKERS

anarchist writers on fiction

“If nobody saw the political context behind my stories, I’d probably just get bored. You don’t just want to be an entertainer the rest of your life.”

—Cristy C. Road

part eight

CRISTY C. ROAD

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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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CRISTY C. ROAD

One of the most iconic punk illustrators working today, Cristy C. Road's signature style has graced the cover of many a DIY book and zine. She's been writing and illustrating her own zines for ten years, but she's stepped into the world of bound books recently as well. Her illustrated novel Bad Habits blurs the lines of fiction and autobiography just as it blurs the borders of what is, or isn't, a novel.

She came to do a reading in Baltimore and I met up with her beforehand to talk about what it means for a DIY punk to find commercial success, about learning to connect with people, about working with editors, about what we choose to glorify. And Green Day. We talked about Green Day a lot.

Margaret: *One of the things I wanted to talk to you about is actually something from the acknowledgements in the back of your novel Bad Habits, about how a friend told you that changing doesn't mean selling out...*

Cristy: I thanked my friend Holly for letting me know that changing doesn't mean selling out. She's my literary agent. She's this radical woman who grew up with zines, she's a lesbian, and has had all of these experiences that are really inspiring and radical, but you know, she's way older than me and she's a literary agent. She made me realize that I can say what I need to say, make my art, outside of the specifically anarchist community and not compromise what I need to say.

Indestructible, which I put out before—which is about growing up in Miami as a teenager—was edited for misspelled words and sentences that *really* didn't make sense. But I read it now and I'm just like, "I don't know what the fuck I'm talking about here." I don't want to change that book or anything, I like that it's a little imperfect. But that one feels more like a zine. It's a bunch of consistent short stories that all have something to do with each other, and are chronologically placed, but they don't read as a narrative.


This is the first book that I've written where things pop up in the end that were brought up in the beginning. It's still not traditionally presented. I didn't want to do a comic. I'd like to, but I don't like drawing people having dialogue. I just want to draw people ripping out their insides and people having sex... I don't want to draw people talking or walking. But I will, I need to develop my skills. I want to do a full graphic novel someday. But for now, I was really inspired by *Cruddy*, by Lindy Berry, and *Blood & Guts in High School* by Kathy Acker.

Margaret: *So do you think that there's something positive to be said about having this other group of people going through your work before they publish it?*

Cristy: Yeah, because the people who were editing, they know where I'm coming from. They've read all the same zines I've read. One of the editors was my age. It's just that he went to school for writing. Both of the editors, they've been doing what they're doing for so long, but they work for this indie press that's really into putting out work that other people don't want to put out. A lot of other publishers that we sent the book to, the editors were into it, the young editors, but the bosses were like, "This is too edgy, we don't want to put it out, no one will buy it." But the people at Soft Skull are down. And they always ask for my approval before they make changes. It was a really positive experience because it was all constructive criticism, and no one was like, "This part of the book isn't important," or "Why do you have to say this?" It was a good editing process.

Margaret: *Do you feel like something can be accomplished, as a writer, not just from a purely literary standpoint, but in terms of things like effecting social change?*

Cristy: I'm at a point where I'm not as involved in as many local groups and organizations as I used to be. I want to, and my brain is getting a little more functional again, but for the past 3 years I've just been writing and drawing. I still get the same response to my work that's like, "This piece of writing helped me deal with my assault, helped me deal with coming out to my family." And that's why I'm doing what I'm doing. If nobody saw the political context or the message behind my stories, I'd probably just get bored. You don't just want to be an entertainer the rest of your life. I'm really grateful that people identify with it.

But I don't really like to write about my situation as though I'm perfect at dealing with it. Obviously, if you read *Bad Habits*, you'll learn that I'm not really skilled at dealing with a lot of things, especially getting broken up with. I want to write about things we all persecute ourselves for doing, but I want to write about them and let people know they don't need to persecute themselves. 

Cristy: *Bad Habits* is very autobiographical. It's fictionalized, but a lot of the things that I write about are things that I've experienced, that I've felt, that would be considered bad choices. But humans make bad choices. There was this review of the book that I read from a very liberal webpage. It was very, "This is just glorifying young people who are messed up. It's another woman whining about her irresponsibilities." Instead of realizing it was about a woman discussing abusive relationships, it was like, "God, get over your ex-boyfriend." It was very unfair and fucked up, but that's the way society thinks. Nobody wants to hear things that they see in themselves. I like to write about things the way that they are. Being in love with someone who is kinda an asshole. Everyone has been in love with someone who is kind of an asshole. And for the rest of your life you're going to be like, "Well that was my first love." I still fall in love with assholes all the time.

I guess my goal would be to just show, to humanize the fact that we're all kind of messed up and that we're all going to make mistakes. We should persecute each other when we don't own up to our mistakes. But if we *do* own up to our mistakes, we should talk about it and grow.

Margaret: *The format of the story itself is non-traditional, especially with the way you intersperse illustration. It definitely seems like a novel born of the per-zine [personal zine] tradition. Was writing the book unconventionally a conscious choice?*

Cristy: I never went to school for writing. I mean, I read books. I love Tom Robbins, but I knew I wasn't going to rewrite *Still Life With Woodpecker*. But I spent most of my life writing short stories that were written in a very grammatically incorrect way. A lot of my influences were songwriters. I grew up listening to Green Day and Crimpshrine, and just being like, "Oh my god, these are the best lyrics I'm going to write a story that sounds just like these lyrics." I use a lot of fragments, a lot of paragraphs that are just one sentence fragment and then a new paragraph. Just expressing what I need to say in the way that I'm thinking it. And the book went through so much editing. I didn't know how to use semi-colons, I used the word frivolous like a million times on one page...

Margaret: *Frivolously?*

Cristy: Yeah. I used it frivolously. It was awesome to work with a publisher who edits. It went through five rounds of editing. But it was good. Now the book is in chronological order, but when I first handed it into them, they asked me, "Why are you talking about being a 15 year-old here and then being a 20-year old before?" It was written like, "Short story, short story, short story," and then I got help putting it all together. The writing didn't change at all really; it was mostly structural changes. I was called out on sentences that made absolutely no sense, and I got rid of a lot of those. *Bad Habits* was the first book that went through that process.

I wanted to make my work accessible to people who aren't me: other Latino people, other queer people, other women who don't have the radical community that supports the way that they think. I just wanted my work out there and accessible to people who have had similar experiences as me but don't have that community to fall back on.

And she made me realize that selling out is more about compromising what you have to say. Like if someone had said, "We'll give you \$20,000 if you take this part out of the book," then I would have been like, "Well I don't need your fucking money." But it's been awesome; I did get money for the book. My publisher Soft Skull is rad; they put out so much amazing work. They just put out *Reproduce and Revolt*, which is a collection of radical propaganda put together by the Justseeds collective. They put out a lot of really rad publications and it's awesome that I ended up working with them and not some huge press I wasn't really ready for. But I would've, cause when you're broke you're broke. If someone was like, "Sure, we'll give you 50 grand for your book," I'd say, "And you're not going to make me change the part about this or the part about this?" If they're like, "Yeah," I'll be like, "Fuck yeah, gimme that money." I've been so broke for so long. You've gotta survive. So yeah, change can mean growth. Change doesn't have to mean selling out if you're not compromising your beliefs and what you want to say.

Margaret: *I agree with that. I think it's really important to learn how to speak to groups outside of the niche that we're used to...*

Cristy: To bring them into the niche. [*Laughs*]

Margaret: *That's right. To make multiple niches, so there's not one homogenous radical culture...*

Cristy: But instead a lot of different ones. People are coming from a lot of different backgrounds. Like me, someone who is still in the punk rock scene—have been my whole life—I've never really listened to hip-hop music before. Growing up in Miami, I saw all these hip-hop communities that had the same ideas and wanted to express the same values, but there were things about those communities that I didn't identify with just like there were things about my community that those other people didn't identify with.

It's all about finding ways to cross over, finding things that make us all connect. I'm writing about being queer, about being Latina, about being a woman, and there're a lot of queer Latin girls who aren't punk rock, or a lot of Latin girls who aren't queer, a lot of queer girls who aren't Latin. It's all about finding different things that you can connect with people through.

Margaret: *I was going to ask how you got into writing, if it was through zines and the punk scene...*

Cristy: I started writing my zine [*Greenzine*]*—it was all about Green Day—when I was 14. It was very, "I have no friends, I have no community. All I know*

is Green Day, Lookout! Records, and all the bands affiliated with Green Day.” I just wrote this zine about how I can’t experience punk rock the way that older people experienced it because I was introduced to it through Green Day, this “sellout” band. But as this gigantic Green Day freak, I knew that they grew up hella poor. And now people have grown; no one is like, “Oh fuck Green Day, they’re sellouts.” It’s 2008, it’s been a really long time. But at the time it was ‘95, and everyone was so angry, saying, “Oh my god punk rock is becoming mainstream what are we going to do?” Yeah, well, shit happens and we needed to learn who was fake and who was not.

And that’s what inspired me to write: writing about punk, interviewing bands. Then I started writing about my own experiences, after reading more personal zines, and books too. Dorothy Allison I loved, JD Salinger, Cometbus, *Doris*, *Absolutely Zippo*, *Emergency Zine*. It’s funny because I was never into comics, but since I liked drawing I was always like, “I might as well illustrate my stories.” And that’s still what I’m doing now, writing and then drawing based on the writing. I usually write first and then draw.

Margaret: *I’m trying to explore what it means to be both an anarchist and fiction writer...*

Cristy: I guess when I was 17 or 18 and I started doing Food Not Bombs and working with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers in south Florida. I was working with a lot of the migrant farm workers who are way underpaid. I was becoming an activist outside of my brain, outside of creating art. And by being more involved in the world, I started thinking about my identity: who fucked me over, why am I the way I am, why were Green Day the only people who understood me when I was 14? They were writing these songs questioning religion, sexuality.

And having radical beliefs is really what made me want to create anything at all. I can’t just write about bands for the rest of my life. So when I was older and started getting involved in movements that weren’t necessarily just art and music, started seeing other people doing things, I decided I wanted to do those things too. And I wanted to write about it. Experience it and then write about it. A lot of my zines were just me documenting protests, Food Not Bombs, my community. I’d write about how you can exist as a queer person in an anarchist community that is mostly straight, or as a person of color in an anarchist community that is mostly white. Challenging all of those ideas, that’s really what got me writing a lot. Those were the last issues of my zine.

And then that just kind of snowballed into writing what I’m writing about now. *Bad Habits* is about existing in the world as young and messed up and confused, post-activist I guess. It’s about leaving your community because you feel crazy and depressed and suicidal and you start doing a bunch of drugs. How do you rebuild yourself? How can you be that really radical, awesome, strong person that you were before you fell apart? And what made you fall apart? Was it the community you were in? Was it abuse? So what I’m writing now is about human experiences, like love, about rebuilding your body after abuse. Of course there’s the constant questioning of why do we live in this society that makes it so fucking hard to call out someone who’s been violent in a

sexual relationship? Why do we live in a society where it is so hard to be bipolar and be seen as normal? I still want to write about society and how it hurts us, but I’m not really writing about protests anymore. I mean, I may, who knows, but this is about *Bad Habits*, my most recent piece of work.

Margaret: *In Bad Habits, you dealt with sexuality in a very mature way, talking about how it can be both positive and negative. I feel like that balance isn’t present in most writing about sex, particularly fictional and particularly illustrated. Actually, it was kind of embarrassing reading the book in a public setting...*

Cristy: I know! When I first got it and I was like, “Oh I wanna look through it every day,” cause it’s my baby, you know? And I was riding the bus and I was like, “Oh that’s a blowjob, I gotta cover that part, oh there’s boobs there...” But yeah, how can you live in the world and be a sexual person, although that is such a stigmatized thing, especially as a woman? How can you use sex to heal from fucked up sex?

Margaret: *One of the things that you’re known for is illustrating body types outside our culture’s standard of beauty, and I was wondering how conscious that decision was?*

Cristy: It’s funny, because my entire life I’ve just been drawing my friends or people who want to be drawn, or people who I think are awesome. My reality isn’t all these “flawless” people. There are a lot of awesome women illustrators, and men too, who are putting really intense ideas out there, yet all the people they’re drawing have perfect boobs, are really small and Barbie looking. That’s fine too, I’ve drawn thin people with perfect boobs before, but it’s not really the focus, the focus is just people in general. Who’s to say what kind of boobs are perfect? It’s just annoying. There are a lot of illustrators who they themselves are really awesome radical people with really awesome ideas but they’re still submitting to this standard of beauty in art, like in the Renaissance, but it’s not the Renaissance anymore.

Anything could be beautiful if it’s drawn... I love old things, old cities. Looking at something and observing it and seeing what you love about it and then implementing that into a piece of art it can glorify anything. Anything can be glorified through art, which I always felt is what made art a powerful tool. Showing bodies that are considered imperfect, transforming what would be imperfect into a beautiful image. Also, it helps to be attracted to things that are conventionally imperfect.

Margaret: *I think that ties into what you write about. I think that a lot of radical people will glorify their subjects, but you write about real people...*

Cristy: With issues.

Margaret: *Yeah.*