

MYTHMAKERS & LAWBREAKERS

anarchist writers on fiction

“Most people look at a piece of technology and ask, ‘What does that do?’ and a hacker looks at the same piece of technology and says, “What can I do with it?’ ”

—Rick Dakan


part twelve
RICK DAKAN

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Margaret Killjoy

need to be presented with the idea that there's fiction out there for them and that hopefully that'll seep into their understanding of their options for entertainment. It's interesting, what is that culture's reading habits, their entertainment habits? I don't know that I know enough about that. It's one of those things where you go into it thinking that everyone thinks like you, but then you're there and I just don't actually understand, as it turns out. And I don't have a whole lot of time to try to understand, you know? That's part of my difficulty with having such disparate reading groups. Who do I talk to, who do I reach out to? It's easy to do a little for everybody and not enough for anyone.

I'd be really interested in hearing what you find out, because it's a nut worth cracking. There's a lot of value there. For a lot of reasons. Maybe people take themselves a little less seriously when they're dealing with fiction, which I think is usually a good thing, and it's also a good way for people to reach out, like *The Dispossessed*. Or with my stuff, like, "Hey, here's this book you can give to a friend or a loved one or to your local library. Here's some of our ideas, enjoy." See what happens. 

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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Margaret: *How has the tech scene reacted to your books?*

Rick: I get very positive receptions at hacker cons and things like that. A few weeks from now, *Black Hat Blues* is coming out, and it's the one most directly on hacker culture. I spent much of 2006 going to hacker conventions, so a lot of the stories in the first third of that book are fictionalized versions of things that really happened.

It takes place at ShmooCon, which is a real convention. My friend Heidi who runs it makes an appearance in the novel. She says she read it with her hand over her face, peering through her fingers. She was enjoying it, but at the same time she was like, "Oh god, I know who that is..." It will be interesting to see what the reaction from the hacker cons will be now. I think it will be good, because it's made up but it's all true. I tried to portray the community in a relatively nuanced, true way.

Margaret: *How about from the anarchist scene, or the radical scene?*

Rick: Not as good, certainly. First of all, they just don't read fiction. I went to the San Francisco anarchist bookfair. And I had the only new novel there. New York too. When I was behind the table, you'd just get a confused look from people, "It's a novel?" I don't know; it seems like a tougher nut to crack. It's funny, because I got an interesting review, from some lefty website or magazine, who hated *Geek Mafia: Mile Zero*. The thing that he was upset about was that basically, it was like he was Winston [a traditionally radical character]. Everything I critiqued about Winston, about the reactionary old guard? Clearly he was just that guy. So I was actually pleased with that negative review. It was pretty savage, but it seemed like I managed to hit the nail on the head.

As much as I love most things about anarchism, we make Democrats look like the most unified people in the world. The splintering within the anarchist scene is a thing to behold. I haven't gotten enough feedback to know for certain, but you almost run the risk of offending more people cause there're more little ways to offend people. But who knows? Maybe they'll just be happy to have the scene portrayed in some sort of positive light.

Margaret: *So the radical scene is often confused when they're presented with fiction. One of the things that I'm trying to promote with this book is that it's okay to write fiction, and that it's okay to write fiction that isn't just a dry, non-story description of a utopia. Do you have any ideas?*

Rick: I don't have any silver bullet ideas, but I think the only way to change a culture like that is to keep throwing options at them. There's that standard marketing truism, that a person sees a product seven times before they decide to buy it. You might be able to extrapolate from that that they just

RICK DAKAN

Rick Dakan is an anarchist geek. A few years back he was fired from a video game company he helped found, Cryptic Studios (who make the City of Heroes MMORPG), and soon turned that tale into Geek Mafia, a crazy revenge-fantasy crime novel with hacker con-artists as the heroes who scam money from the right-wing. Very enjoyable reading, let me tell you.

I read through the first two Geek Mafia books, and then had the chance to read the then-unpublished third book, Geek Mafia: Black Hat Blues, which introduces anarchist politics more directly. It was also the first novel I read entirely on a screen, but it was engaging enough to hold my attention.

I called him and we talked about hackers, role-playing games, publishing, and of course about anarchy.

Margaret: *So you do a good job making your characters' politics a part of their motivations without actually preaching directly to the audience...*

Rick: When you're telling any kind of story, the character in the story has to come first. Anytime it doesn't, the odds are you're going to end up writing a

crappy story. It's like hiding vitamins in ice cream.

You want to try to work your politics into it, but only when it naturally fits into the story and the characters. The characters in the story have to come first, always. In every one of my books, there is plenty of stuff about the issues that were raised in each of the books that didn't make it into the novel because there wasn't a place for it; there wasn't a reason for anybody to be talking about it or there wasn't a way that it affected the plot or the story. My primary goal is to tell entertaining stories, and if I can sneak in as much of my worldview as I can, that's all the better.

Margaret: *That gets into what I wanted to ask next: what do you think we can accomplish by writing fiction?*

Rick: I grew up reading mostly science fiction and fantasy, but when it came to start writing my own stuff, it almost all tends to be grounded a lot in the real world, although some aspect of the real world that maybe a lot of people aren't familiar with. It's heightened reality, and some of it is verging towards science fiction. But to more directly answer your question, I think you can portray worlds and ideas and ways of behavior and ways of acting that your reader might not otherwise be familiar with. You open a window into another way of existing, another way of thinking. I think that's what fiction has to give with regards to presenting a political message.

To me, the ideal example, the book that has the highest political content that I agree with that still works tremendously as a book is Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*. She gives this compelling, thought-out vision of an anarchist society, but it's a story first. It's a novel about relationships and people; when I gave it to my mother, who is your basic middle-left middle-class American democrat, unfamiliar with any of the politics, she could just enjoy it and love it as a great story. And it opened up the idea, "Oh, so this is how a world like that might work."

So this is what the role of fiction is. It's almost like presenting models, like a concept car. Like how the auto industry puts out all these crazy cars that they never expect to build, but it gets people to think about some particular aspect of car design.

The other thing is that you just never know. You want to put out a book that is genuine and feels true, that conjures up thoughts and images that you want people to have, and you just never have any idea how someone is going to run with that. It could have a big effect. I have friends who grew up in dysfunctional households without a lot of reliable guidance and got their moral core from *Dragonlance Dungeons & Dragons* novels. That's a true story, that's where that guy, as a kid, got a sort of a moral compass. And that's because [authors] Margaret [Weis] and Tracy [Hickman] put that in there. I used to know Tracy Hickman fairly well, and he's a great guy and we get along well—our beliefs are very different, he's a Mormon—

and re-purposing and finding out how things work, it's a great community. I wish that it were more political here in the US. There's a really deep divide in the US between the political hacking scene and the absolutely not-political hacking scene, which you don't find in, say, Germany where they're pretty much all very radical. Or they just don't care about politics, but their natural assumptions are very radical.

There's a lot of great energy in that, but I guess the hacker community cuts across all political spectrums, and it's got a fairly high libertarian quotient. American libertarianism I find tiresome, and sort of morally and intellectually bankrupt. It just drives me nuts. But it's easy—it's easy for a middle-class technology worker to just say that they're a libertarian, and that gives them an excuse to not think about the issues.

Like I said, there's a lot of creative and interesting energy in the hacking scene but it's all over the place. And part of it is that a lot of them are in the security business.

Margaret: *I'd picked up on that specific quote of Sacco's [an anarchist hacker character] in Geek Mafia #3, that European hackers are more into politics than US hackers as a whole. Then Sacco goes on to point out that eschewing politics entirely is bullshit. And it seems like that's what a lot of authors do, eschew politics entirely. Not that everyone has to have the same politics as me, but people just pretend it doesn't exist.*

Rick: Yeah, I find that just so strange. I got a review from a person on a blog who really hated *Geek Mafia*—which is fine, there are plenty of people who hate things that I love and love things that I hate—but his biggest complaint was that I put my politics into it instead of just telling the story. But there is no story without the politics in it. If people don't want to talk about it, that's their prerogative, and I'm definitely not the kind of person who says, "You should do this with your art," but if it's something that you care about, I'm not going to say that you *should* do this with your art, but I *am* going to say you shouldn't *be afraid* to do it with your art. So, for example, I had readers of early drafts say, "You're going to offend some Republicans with this and that's costing you readers." But you know, we're starting out from the premise that not everyone is going to read the book. So just do a book that is honest and you can't be worried about who you're going to offend. Especially, you shouldn't worry about offending people you find offensive. They're the *last* people that I'm worried about offending.

I've had people who liked the book who didn't like the political parts of it, but there are readers out there who can separate the two. I'd like to see more authors put their politics into their work, but at the same time I don't want to see more *Atlas Shrugged's* out there. For all kinds of reasons I don't want to see more *Atlas Shrugged's* out there. It's just not a good book. On one level it's an evil book, but it's also just not a well-written story.

that I read faster and easier on it. I think that that kind of technology, whatever form it takes in the next 5 to 10 years is going to heighten the ability for authors to circumvent the publishers and the stores and go directly to the people.

But then it will be all about how do you actually reach the people, and who are the tastemakers, and that will be a whole new set of challenges. Those tastemakers are going to become so important. It will be interesting to see. With *Geek Mafia*, I met Cory Doctorow at a hacker con, and gave him a copy and he liked it, and he said he was going to write a nice review. I said, “Okay, I’ll set up a sale on my website before you post the review,” and so he posted the review and a link and I sold like 600 books in 18 hours.

Margaret: *Yeah, he did the same thing to me. SteamPunk Magazine got BoingBoing’d and it changed my life from casual zinemaker who found odd jobs to publisher.*

Rick: Those people like him are going to become even more important figures. That’s what my next novel that I’m going to be starting in a couple months is going to be about, among many other things. I think that’s really fascinating. And I have no idea where that’s going to go, how that’s going to work. Clearly, media companies are going to try to co-opt that as much as they can.

Margaret: *Your work deals a lot with the human side of technology, and it’s nice to see stuff coming from radicals about how technology can be liberating, and how it can be used to get over on The Man. You come at this from a hacker point of view, so I’m curious what you think about the liberating aspects of technology.*

Rick: I think they’re just tremendous. You’ve hit on one of my pet peeves, you see it in radical circles and you see it in writer circles—specifically literary and poetry circles—that sort of automatic distaste for technology and the fetishization of nature. I find that nature and technology, they’re all one spectrum of things. My definition of a hacker, most people look at a piece of technology and ask, “What does that do?” and a hacker looks at the same piece of technology and says, “What can I do with it?” And that’s the key thing that I like to highlight. For the most part, most technology is morally neutral. There’s weaponry and toxins and things like that that maybe aren’t, but I see technology in general as what you make of it. I think that it’s important to try to think about making good of it, because you just can’t ignore it. That’s just not going to work. And there are a lot of benefits to not ignoring it.

Margaret: *I like your definition of a hacker a lot.*

Rick: Yeah, feel free to run with it. I’ve seen people use it in talks in hacker cons. That sort of catches what I love about hacker culture, that ethos of exploration

but he’s expressing that sort of core morality in his stories. I don’t know that he ever intended for his fantasy novels to be a moral compass for some kid in Philadelphia, but it happens.

Margaret: *That’s interesting, the idea that you put things out in the unknown and people will react to them however they’ll react to them.*

Rick: Exactly. Your only real job is to throw that mirrored ball out there and hope it reflects the things you want reflected.

Margaret: *How did you get into anarchism?*

Rick: I think that the first thing that came across my plate was *The Temporary Autonomous Zone* by Hakim Bey, and I don’t even know where the hell I got a copy of that. That sort of got me rolling. And *The Dispossessed*, that would be the first explicitly anarchist text that I really engaged with that made it make sense to me.

I’m trying to remember how I came across AK Press, because almost immediately after I came across AK I became a Friend of AK, where I contribute 20 bucks a month or whatever and they send me everything they put out. I was doing that before I had met any of those guys. I met Ramsey [the founder of AK Press] at Book Expo America in 2006 and I’d already put out *Geek Mafia* myself at that point.

Oh! I can’t believe I forgot this, because I’ve been out of comics for so long. It was Grant Morrison, it was *The Invisibles*. That got me to the Hakim Bey, from Grant Morrison’s site, and it went from there. I was reading a lot of comics while I was doing “The City of Heroes,” that superhero videogame, but I ended up reading a lot of non-superhero comic books, like *The Invisibles*, *Transmetropolitan*, *Sandman*.

Margaret: *How about writing? How did you get into writing?*

Rick: I was an undergraduate back in the early nineties for history, and I’d been a pen-and-paper role-playing game player, *Dungeons & Dragons* and that kind of stuff, since elementary school. When I went off to graduate school, I was in a gaming group and a friend of mine and I were going to a big role-playing game convention in Milwaukee called GenCon. He was a programmer for CompuServe at the time and he knew someone from message boards who had just gotten a job at White Wolf [an RPG publisher] in charge of *Wraith* [a game]. Are you an RPG player?

Margaret: *Yeah, I was just playing Dungeons & Dragons last night.*

Rick: Ah! I run a weekly Sunday game. [*And then we geek out about RPGs for several minutes.*] Anyway, *Wraith* was launching that week at GenCon, and on the drive over there we came up with a pitch, and we pitched it and they bought it, so we got the contract to write a gamebook. So while I was in grad school, I started doing that for extra money and then it just took over. So from 1995–2000, I was pretty much doing full-time pen-and-paper RPG design and writing. I worked on 30 different books at that time. That’s how I got my start, which was a great way to start because I was making not a lot of money, but enough to do it full-time. And since it was low money and high word count, I developed a good work-from-home ethic and the ability to write a lot. 2000 words a day, 5 or 6 days a week. Which has continued to serve me well. Then I went from that into then having the idea for the computer game, then after that a comic book based on the videogame, and now the novels.

Margaret: *What is it like working with radical publishers versus other kinds?*

Rick: Well, I’ve worked for Wizards [a major RPG publisher], so that’s pretty mainstream. For sure there’s a difference. That’s when I’ve had to make the most changes to things. I was doing some Dragonlance stuff, so there were a lot more people with their fingers in the pot about what’s appropriate and about whether or not you can have your ogre bathe in a cauldron full of elf blood or not. That was a specific thing that was in there that I had to call back. I’ve never had to for novels.

This new one, I’m just about to start shopping around to bigger publishers because I kinda need to make more money with it, so we’ll see. I do know just from my limited exposure that once you get into that area of experienced dedicated fiction editors, they have a lot of things that they expect and a lot of things that they don’t like just out of hand. The great thing about working with PM Press [a radical publisher] has been they just react to the material based on whether or not it works for them rather than, “Does it fit into this box neatly?” or, “Does it follow this format?” If we could sell more, I would never go anywhere else. That’s probably true of a lot of writers.

It’s so tough these days. We’re in an awkward stage, though I think it’s actually going to get better for creators. With *Geek Mafia*, when I put it out, I had a distribution deal, and they got it in front of the book buyers for the two chains, for Barnes & Nobles and Borders. And it’s just one person who makes that decision. Your book has that one shot at that one meeting and that’s whether or not it gets ordered for the whole country. Borders actually picked it up and carried it, but didn’t order many, in a phase when they were experimenting, so they were taking more stuff but they were returning it 60 days later if it didn’t catch. So it was like, “Oh wow, Borders ordered a bunch,” and then, “Oh, Borders sent them all back.” So that’s gonna get better as it gets easier to reach directly to people, as it’s already getting better for musicians. I

read most of my books on my Kindle [an eBook reader] these days, and print-on-demand and all of that kind of stuff will help. But we’re at an awkward phase with media right now.

Margaret: *Since I started doing these interviews about two years ago, the publishing industry has been shattered; it’s changed drastically. You’re in a good position to be watching it from the point of view of someone who is both radical but also wants to make your living through writing.*

Rick: Everything is even more complicated given recent economic events. Everything is cracking up. Everything is niche-ifying. The big publishers are getting more skittish. The big document for me of the last year or so was Kevin Kelly’s blogpost “1000 True Fans.” His point is, and he does the math on it, if you, as a creator, can get 1000 true fans—and a true fan is defined as someone will over the course of one year will spend one day’s wages on products you produce—then that’s all you need. If you could have 365 days of someone’s average wages, that should be all you need. And 1000 true fans come with 5000 casual fans and 10,000 one-time fans. And so I think that’s the way to go, but it’s just getting over that hump. For me, ideally, I’d sell *I, Avatar* [Dakan’s upcoming novel] to a publisher that would put enough muscle behind it that I could get enough eyeballs that I could capture. And then I’d go back to doing it myself or doing it through PM. It’s just finding that audience.

I’ve learned the lessons of times when I could have been more focused on capturing and retaining the audience that I’ve had and squandered those opportunities that I’m now kind of regretting. I think that’s the key. I think that to succeed as a writer, or any creator, that element of self-promotion is just gonna get more and more important. The onus is gonna fall on each individual to create their own world, which I think is great, I think that’s absolutely the way it should be. It’s just a matter of doing it, which can be a pain, and not everyone is gonna succeed. I’m certainly happier to have a world with 100 people who sell 5,000 books as compared to 5 people who sell 100,000 books. I think that’s a much more interesting world to be in.

I really do see it all coming down. Maybe not in the next 5 years, but maybe the next 15. Have you played with a Kindle at all?

Margaret: *No, not yet. I’ve still got this thing for dead tree books, too.*

Rick: Yeah, a book is a great piece of technology, there’s no denying it.

I had some eBook reader that I really liked but I stopped being able to use it when I switched my computer over to Linux. But the new Kindle, the screen is a lot easier to read. They’re still too pricey to catch on mass-wise, but when they’re \$75 in a few years? The built in wireless, books just appear on it that I pre-order, plus it can hold multiple books at once. And for whatever reason, I actually find