

CrimethInc. in Anarchist Fiction Anthology

CrimethInc.

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AK Press has just published a collection of interviews with anarchist authors who write fiction, entitled *Mythmakers and Lawbreakers*. The interviewees include Ursula Le Guin, Derrick Jensen, Alan Moore, Starhawk, and an anonymous CrimethInc. ex-worker. The interview references two children's books, *The Secret World of Terijian* and *The Secret World of Duvbo*, that are neither published by nor available through CrimethInc. Far East.

CrimethInc. is a collective entity that invites open participation: anyone can write, organize, and publish under the name. For the past decade or so they have turned out an incredible body of books, in many ways revitalizing the world of anarchist publishing. Their books are high quality, available quite cheaply, well-designed, and speak to a different audience than a lot of other anarchist literature. While much of the "history" in Days of War, Nights of Love might be considered fiction, I was also deeply interested in their two children's books: The Secret World of Duvbo and The Secret World of Terijian_. Since this interview, they've also released_ Expect Resistance, a unique book that moves between fictional narrative and theoretical essay quite fluidly.

After a brief email correspondence, I had the pleasure of interviewing an anonymous author who, along with many others, writes under the CrimethInc. moniker. We climbed up into a dusty belfry while a radical bookfair bustled beneath our feet. And contrary to the way most interviews go, this one started with the author asking me a question:

CrimethInc.: What did you think the main differences between *The Secret World of Terijian* and *The Secret World of Duvbo* were?

Margaret: Well, they were both trying to get a political point across, but the *Duvbo* book had a lot more subtlety to it; it wasn't as much about fighting as it was about discovering your imagination, as compared to the *Terijian* book, which was "kids discover the ELF."

CrimethInc.: I don't think that they're too different. The *Duvbo* story is supposed to bring out the ways in which the dynamics within people and communities contribute to their subjugation. They're subjugated by their own inertia, their cultural norms, and their fear of acknowledging all the secret parts of themselves. It's an optimistic story; in the end, it is only two ruling class people against the whole town.

Whereas with *Terijian*, it's actually two protagonists versus the world; their parents aren't on board for the struggle. Well, there's the two kids and then there are the ELFs—there are just a few of them.

Perhaps you could argue that both books bring out the limitations or shortcomings of the political programs they propose. I hadn't thought about this until now, but the former book seems to suggest, "We're all anarchists in waiting and if we could just be openly what we secretly are, everything will change. The ruling powers will just leave." It's a little optimistic, like I said. *Terijian*—which is a benefit for the Green Scare victims—tells a story similar to the one that the Green Scare came out of: it's just us, and maybe a few other people, but we'll never know who they are because they're in masks, and we're the ones who have to make a revolution against normal society. That's also not a recipe for success. I mean, the parents don't get involved in the struggle, they're not punching the construction workers in the end, and the construction workers aren't punching their bosses.

Terijian is a true story, in that the authors see it as a sort of allegory of the Minnehaha Freestate. *Duvbo* is like a creation myth for a world that hasn't come to be yet.

Margaret: What are you attempting to accomplish when you write fiction? Do you think you have accomplished anything with your fiction writing?

CrimethInc.: There are writers whose whole project is to express themselves: "This really expresses me, these are my innermost feelings." Personally, I'm not interested in that. I think that writing is an attempt to... if I say the word "communicate," it sounds like there is some sort of object that is in one place that I'm attempting to convey to another place, and I would rather use a word that emphasizes that you're trying to create a dynamic between people by introducing some new force, which is the words. So for me, writing isn't about expressing myself, like I have some thing inside of me that I have to bring out and I'll give it to people and they'll be different or richer or something. It's more like it's a way to exert a lever on social situations. So I'm not possessive of my work per se; I try to contribute to the social milieu, or to the ongoing dialogue, in such a way that things happen.

I think non-fiction is overrated in terms of how non-fiction it is. Everything that you write is going to be a construct; when you're writing history you're choosing to leave out 99.9% of everything. You're basically making up a story by choosing what to include. You could tell the story of the Spanish civil war by writing about what everyone had for breakfast every morning. The fact that we throw out the breakfasts and focus only on the military engagements or what was mentioned in the newspapers, that's not totally true to reality. But how could you be true to reality?

So writing fiction is just a way to let yourself off the hook: "I'm telling a story." Maybe it's a way to be more accountable, because you're actually telling a story and that's the focus, the story, as opposed to, "Oh, this is the truth," which is debatable in every case, be it a historical truth or a philosophical truth.

Margaret: CrimethInc. is both famous and notorious for blurring history and fiction anyway. In *Days of War, Nights of Love*, there are all the references to fictional historical events or a certain spin on historical events. What led CrimethInc. to do that?

CrimethInc.: I can't answer for everything in *Days of War*. You can sort of tell that *Days of War* was put together by enthusiastic young people who were saying to themselves, "Fuck it! Let's just say this! Let's see what happens!" That can have bad results or good results. The exciting thing about *Days of War* is the vitality; you can tell that the people who put it together weren't thinking about it as a book that a lot of people were going to read. And that's the kind of fearlessness that you can only have once as a publisher; once everything you put out under that name is going to receive attention, your actions are whole lot heavier. It's a lot harder to move that freely.

One of the aspects of free motion in that book is the devil-may-care approach to history: "Oh, we'll just say this, maybe it happened, maybe it didn't." One of the points of that, presumably, is to cast into doubt all the other books that say, "This happened, and this was the truth." *Days of War* seems to proclaim, "Don't believe us, obviously we're making things up; maybe you shouldn't believe them either, maybe they're making things up." Maybe all the other books you can get are also fabrications, constructions, or at least should be treated as such.

One might say the traditional way to approach activism or radical literature is to ask, "How do we get people to believe our new idea? How do we get people to believe this new ideology?" That's not actually particularly useful. Everybody is trying to compete to convert people to their ideology. It seems like the revolutionary thing would be to get people to look at ideologies and reality differently. That would be a part of moving to another phase of revolutionary struggle. So how do you write a book that simultaneously calls itself and all other books into question, in such a way that it has a dynamic effect on the readership rather than persuading people to your opinion? In the regard you mention, *Days of War* is a clumsy but audacious attempt to answer that question.

Margaret: Why do you choose to be anonymous under the CrimethInc. moniker?

CrimethInc.: As I mentioned, I'm not convinced by the myth of authorship. "These are my thoughts, I came up with them, they're under my name." That whole copyright thing? That's all about private property. Folk songs—before so-called "riot" folk I mean—there are songs that nobody knows who wrote them, everybody sings them. They're collective property. Everybody adjusts them to their specific situations. I think that that's a much more sensible format. All sorts of CrimethInc. material has been published about the question of authorship, so maybe I'd better focus on my own choices, rather than the ideological ones?

First of all, I want to emphasize that language and all the stories inside of it are collectively produced. That is not to say that they are horizontally produced, but they are collectively produced. Capitalism is collectively produced: it's a collective relation that we all participate in, in some ways, but a hierarchical one. We collectively produce language, we collectively produce our ideas. They come out of the conversations we're all having. One person takes some ideas that have been gestating for hundreds of years, writes a book about them, puts his name on it, and makes a whole lot of money or a whole lot of intellectual capital, wins a whole lot of respect, for being the person who's basically privatized this previously wild rainforest of ideas. I think that's bullshit.

Authorship can be useful for accountability, if you're making a claim that you need to be personally answerable for. But if you're testing out an idea on other people, I think removing the authorship can be a pretty good thing. "Don't worry about me and how exciting my biography

is—how does this idea affect you? Does it just bounce off of you? Is it useless to you? Is it exciting?”

I’m interested in seeing language play out as a dynamic between people. Not as an expression of one person’s personal reality, but as a collective construction. And personally, in addition to finding that critique compelling, I’m just not interested in being some John Zerzan or Ernest Hemingway or something, who has to contend with more people knowing my shadow self than my real self. I enjoy working collectively on writing projects with other people; I think that I’m more intelligent contributing to a collective process of writing, just as people are generally more articulate in conversation than they are when they have to compose a monologue extemporaneously. I don’t think anybody deserves, in the good sense or the bad sense, the positives that Hemingway gets. Nobody deserves the misery of being a famous public figure, upon whom everybody else can project their personal psychodramas and resentments.

Margaret: I feel like that happens to a certain degree with the moniker CrimethInc.

CrimethInc.: Well, CrimethInc.’s not important. Everybody can hate CrimethInc. and that’s not a problem. It’s like a false front to absorb all the projections, all the good and bad associations, so that the people involved in it can still be the real individuals they are in their communities, doing the things they care about, without being crippled by people walking up to them on the street and being like, “Oh my god, it’s really you, sign my blah blah blah.”

Since a lot of the attitudes around authors tend toward mythologizing, better to present something that is explicitly a myth for people to mythologize and leave the people who are involved with the project free to go about their real lives.

Margaret: Why did CrimethInc. choose to self-publish?

CrimethInc.: Self-management. CrimethInc. is just a name that a small group of people initially started sticking on self-published projects, with the critique that it is best to have control of what you’re doing. This is a long-running question that goes back much further than The Clash signing with a major label. Let’s say you’re trying to get to know people in your town. Do you go to their parties or throw your own parties? If you only throw your own parties, maybe you’ll only meet the people you can persuade to come to them, but you can create an environment that brings what you want out of those interactions—what’s good for you, and hopefully will be good for the people who choose to come. If you only go to other people’s parties, you’ll always have a limited agency in framing the interactions you have with others.

I remember when they killed Brad Will in Oaxaca, a year ago now, it was right before Halloween. We went to someone’s Halloween party to try to turn people out to come occupy the Mexican consulate with us. We were trying to explain to people that our friend had just been killed, at some fucking party where everybody was just there to drink. It’s sort of a stretch, as metaphors go, but that is why we have our own dinner parties, right, so we can have a space in which the dialogue is about the things that are important to us. I was at some else’s fancy vegan bourgeois Halloween party where everyone’s in costumes and they don’t give a fuck about my friend who got killed, you know what I’m saying? They care about me, but it’s not a space in which we can discuss that, let alone discuss what to do.

So first of all, we’re creating a space that is self-organized and controlled by everyone who participates in it. CrimethInc. isn’t necessarily the most radical experiment in this direction, but

it's significant that the name itself, if not all of the structures that exist under it, is open and freely accessible to all. The Terijian book was published by a totally different group of people than the people who are involved in crimethinc.com. That particular website is still an exclusive and difficult-to-participate-in structure, but the CrimethInc. myth itself is open and accessible to the public.

Why do things ourselves? I mean, fuck capitalism, you know? The initial projects that I was aware of were ones in which people were committing small-scale crime, taking the money, and making free things out of it, saying, "Here's some free things funded by anti-capitalist crime—can we have some more of this please?" When you first got a copy of *Evasion* in zine form, and you're reading the zine, you're some 16-year-old kid, it dawns on you that obviously, that zine was stolen and is a sign of an entire underground community of people who believe in anti-corporate theft as a ethical way of life. The zine is the message, however repetitive and dumb the text in it may be.

I think the content of self-organization is worth 1000 times whatever you can say. I'm sure Verso [largest English language radical book publisher] or someone might publish an amazing anarchist text that lots of people would then read, but the question isn't how to get everyone to read anarchist texts, the question is how we can interact in anarchic ways. You can assign Bakunin at Columbia University and the world won't be any more anarchist.

Margaret: [Here, dear reader, I rambled incoherently for a moment before reaching my point:] I know that CrimethInc. in particular is a scapegoat for people's accusations of lifestylism.

CrimethInc.: You're talking about The Wooden Shoe [a Philadelphia anarchist bookstore] not carrying *Evasion*? I support The Wooden Shoe's choice to not carry *Evasion*. [Note: *Evasion* is a zine that CrimethInc. published in book form, a memoir of a traveling shoplifter that offended some people through its flippant view on homelessness and lack of class critique.] *Evasion* wasn't made to be sold at The Wooden Shoe in its book form. The people who are going to The Wooden Shoe need other things that are available at The Wooden Shoe much more than they need *Evasion*. *Evasion* was made, specifically in book form at least, to subvert the materialism of a certain class of youth, by valorizing another mode of life, not as an end in itself, but with the understanding that if those alternate values were presented as a possibility, as an exciting possibility, that they could only lead, at least for some people, to readers eventually developing a deeper anti-capitalist analysis. I feel that that book has served that purpose in some circles. That's the great thing about us organizing horizontally—freedom of association is one of the other anarchist catchphrases: if people don't want to organize with us it's fine. It's not like the CrimethInc. distribution hub is some giant monolith that if you don't take all of the books suddenly you can't get any of the other books you want either. That what's good about things being structured on a more horizontal basis: everybody can take care of their own stuff rather than depending on one big distributor.

Back to what I said about The Clash signing to that big record label, as one of the first punk bands to sell out or whatever: if all of the energy that had been put into that compromise had been put into building autonomous structures instead, it would be so much easier for us to circulate our ideas today without reinforcing hierarchies. I think that it's absolutely worth whatever you won't be able to do, whatever the drawbacks of doing things yourself are, to reinforce the culture of self-directed activity.

We did finally have to work with Baker & Taylor, the giant distributor, to get books into the libraries. I grew up reading books in the library. I think that that is important, that's one of the few currently existing communal forms of wealth, our libraries. The way I understand the way the distribution is set up, first the books go into all the DIY channels of circulation that are available, then they also go to Baker & Taylor and the bigger distributors, so that people who can't find them in the DIY environment maybe encounter them elsewhere, because it's also not good to keep our projects a secret. Baker & Taylor and all of those motherfuckers... you know, to get one ISBN number you have to buy 10 of them, so you can't just be one person with a book. I think we need more cooperatives, more groups of people who would need ten ISBN numbers, so the individuals don't get screwed. I'm not saying that that is a solution to capitalism, but it is a way to collectively organize in the meantime.

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