

The Cranky Interview:
"Fiction as Cabinetry, Theater, Enchantment and Disenchantment"
Norman Lock talks to John Olson

Several years ago, I was asked to review Norman Lock's novel, A History of the Imagination, published by Fiction Collective Two in 2004. I loved this book. I gave it to my wife, Roberta. She loved it. We agreed it was the best writing we had come across since reading the greats like Joyce and Beckett and Virginia Woolf.



It was not structured in the conventional manner with a clear-cut plot driven by character development, but rather a series of frame stories focused on many of the luminaries of the early twentieth century; figures such as Anna Pavlova, Raymond Roussel, Albert Einstein, Teddy Roosevelt, and Wilbur and Orville Wright. We conducted this interview via email, while

Norman was busy scraping wallpaper and paint from a bedroom until he "reduced it to something like the interior of a skull."

John Olson: When did you first start writing? Who or what inspired you to write?

Norman Lock: How the wish in me to write was fostered, why I should have wished at all to be a writer, is lost to me. But what determined me to write as I have come to write was discovering, at age 19, Donald Barthelme's then newly published *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts* and Kenneth Barnard's "King Kong: A Meditation." As a perspicacious reviewer of my *A History of the Imagination*, John, you will no doubt be delighted by the latter admission. Other influences on that book—to depart momentarily from your first question—came later and are largely theatrical. (Raymond Roussel's *Impressions of Africa* I knew in English translation and not at all intimately.) But long before I came to write that novel of mine (if it

is a novel), I was writing plays. But perhaps I should begin with the poetry, which I wrote and have all but forgotten. Poetry was how I thought first to spirit the words onto the page—the words that I had in me then. Between the writing of poems, which lasted 10 years, and the writing of plays, which lasted 15 years more, I wrote a handful of stories—only one of them at all original. That story was published by *The Paris Review*, receiving its Aga Kahn Prize for 1979. I recall having introduced that story, in my accompanying letter to George Plimpton, as a cross between Doctorow's *Ragtime* and Barthelme's short fiction. It could not have been very original, although George Plimpton said it was. I have been writing stories—fiction—exclusively, with the devotion of a stylite, since 1995.

JO: The mainstream publishing world seems off-limits to any writing that does not strictly conform to its standards of plot and character development. Small press publishers are a poor solution. Only a very few can afford any kind of distribution outside of Small Press Distribution in Berkeley, California, which is not large enough to distribute books in bookstores nationally but offers a catalogue to people on its mailing list. It's a tough way to get your work out there. The profit-driven objectives of the big publishing houses seem to me a form of market censorship. This is one of my pet peeves, but it may not be yours. I thought I would sound you out on it.

NL: I do not mind in the least, John, if we make this a conversation rather than an interview, although your knowledge of literature and literary criticism surpasses my own. You lament that you are denied wider distribution of your published work by the grim circumstances of contemporary publishing. This is indeed the case, but one I no longer bemoan. When you and I chose (or were chosen) to write fiction that is not for the general, we agreed—like it or not—to remove ourselves from a mass-market and its operations. Many there were who deplored the condition of the American theatrical establishment in the 1960s for its hostility to originality of

structure, voice, and language. Some simply went on deploring it while others created Off-Broadway and an authentic regional theater. In the '70s, Off-Broadway was becoming nearly as ossified as the Broadway it had replaced. The result was an Off-Off-Broadway and studio theaters that welcomed the exceptional.

Liberality of mind and spirit is succeeded always by the reactionary, which yields, in turn, to an alternative. There is nothing surprising in this. I am happy that there are alternative presses, such

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as FC2, Ravenna Press, Triple Press, and Calamari Press, to seriously entertain the fiction that I wish to make, as well as independent magazines to publish our stories. When I think of Joyce and Beckett and Michaux, I am cheered and glad to be in their company—not that I have their talent, but I share their banishment to the

margin. I do not mind at all that margin, John, for there I enjoy the society of a sufficiency of sympathetic readers. What constitutes a “sufficiency”? That very much depends on the quality of readers. A handmade book that Deron Bauman made for me in 2000 during his short-lived *elimae* books venture was read by less than 50 people, but among them were Gordon Lish, Diane Williams, Brian Evenson, Dawn Raffel, Faruk Ulay, Cooper Renner, Kathryn Rantala, and Guy Davenport. They form, for me, a sufficiency of readers.

To acknowledge such a limitation is to accept a reduced role for the writer. I do not believe that what I write can change the world or the people in it. I don't believe that anything written by a contemporary *literary artist* has that power over a mass audience. There are some who believe they can restructure consciousness using language and narratives that defy convention. But their visionary writing will scarcely

be read by the people most in need of a transformed consciousness. The only work that has power to engage a mass audience is sentimental (which is a lie) or pornographic (which is also a lie, though perhaps a more entertaining one). We can rue this. We can set down the causes to mainstream publishing or to a degeneration in popular taste and appreciation that have little to do with literacy. But we can and should seek out our own margin and make our literature there.

JO: Earlier, you mentioned several things that are of great interest to me and provide some keen insight into your writing. First, you mentioned poetry, which does not at all surprise me, since your narratives are keyed so pertinently to the charms and enchantments of language. It is in this respect that I find your work so closely resembles that of Raymond Roussel, whose quirky machinery and bizarre scenarios appear to be enmeshed with the very language that gave them being. You also mentioned Donald Barthelme, a writer of considerable inventiveness whose stories evince a giddy sense of the absurd combined with an exquisite urbanity and whose language shares that same formative quality as Roussel's. What all this adds up to is a feeling that the writer is a figure very similar to Prospero in *The Tempest*, a conjurer whose powers are embedded in language, in the drama of the written word. You mentioned theater as another influence, so I imagine the image of the writer creating storms and liberating spirits trapped in trees is pretty significant. I see a parallel, too, between the magician Prospero and the stylites, the early Christian ascetics who lived unsheltered on the tops of high pillars. Do you think of the book as a theater? A place of enchantment?

NL: My work has been called theater. This is very much to the point of my enterprise. Text as stage. The white page "blocked" with notations for the actors of my little stage engines that produce sometimes nothing more important than an ape dressed in yellow gloves and spats dueling with cigars for the love of Mrs. Willoughby.

Sometimes my ideas are significant. Sometimes my theaters presume to take on the most profound metaphysical questions of

the age. Why should they not? I am of my age and think the big thoughts that all men think.

What's more, the apparatus of theater intrigues me. I have always been in love with stage props, the *papier-mâché* and *trompe l'oeil*

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world that becomes evident when one is permitted to examine the props up close. *A History of the Imagination* is filled with these props, this furniture. Some of the later "histories" are set in theaters, emblems for me of the marvelous and the magical. They are, these highly "artificial" stories, theaters in which consciousness—and also the unconscious—can have its

say. I like to think that in my best fictions, I dramatize the conflict of unconscious impulses. I meant, in the histories, to create a *mise en scène* that is, becomes, manifests, materializes the unconscious—is, in fact, a Theater of the Unconscious. And, of course, *Joseph Cornell's Operas* is nothing if not an homage to theater; the one that still survives, shining, in my mind.

If my fiction is worthy of notice, it is made so by theater and by poetry. And one can still discern in the fiction, the pricking conscience. I may disregard the wider world of men in my writing, but the working-class Philadelphia boy who grew up in the 1960s can still make himself felt. I learned in some long-ago classroom that the best writing exhibits tension between two antithetical impulses. Perhaps that writing of mine that is good is good because of it.

JO: What might those two antithetical impulses be for you?

NL: The flight from an unlovely present in tension with its opposite: an involvement in that present, which would take the form of a compassionate response—using language—aimed at the

alleviation of suffering. Stein or Steinbeck. Perhaps if I were not convinced of literature's impotence in the face of present enormities, I might write other than I do. Perhaps in setting down Steinbeck as the contrary term, I am admitting nevertheless to the possibility of a literature of social amelioration. I may assert language's incapacity in order to justify a Decadent indulgence. I am enamored of language and the liberation from natural law it grants.

A carpenter makes a cabinet. No one questions the cabinet's realism or lack of realism. Fiction ought to enjoy the same prerogative of independent existence; it is, after all, another act of making, of facture, a fabrication.

A cabinet is not obliged to be anything more than it is, a cunningly crafted collection of materials, regardless of to what ultimate use or disuse it is put. It is under no obligation to signify. A fictional text can exist independent of the consensus of reality and still serve various ends outside itself. For me, these ends are pleasure, surprise, delight, and occasionally mystification. Even deliberate obscurity has its uses, although it can be irritating. Occasionally the cabinet may even illuminate psychological or social dimensions. How can it not, being, as it must be, in the world—a world with those dimensions? So long as it is understood that they are not the sole measure of the world.

Life is a mystery to me. Why should my fiction be less mysterious than life?

And then I am reminded of the horrific suffering of people and of animals and am anguished by my egoism. The carpenter delivers himself of his anguish or his joy in words. Words must, like it or not, carry the burden of thought. These contradictions—

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opposed stresses—are evident in everything I write. I would much rather have been a painter or a composer. I would like to have designed theater and opera sets.

JO: I really like your analogy of writing with the cabinet and cabinet maker. I know precisely what you mean: the need for a poem or short story to be so true to its own inner logic that it becomes an autonomous object. This is particularly so if the work contradicts so-called reality. Physical law. But there is indulgence in this, defiance as well, since it is making of language, an eminently public medium, a more hermetic medium, which has the potential for alienating the artist from his or her audience, depending on how radical our language experiment becomes. Suddenly the cabinet begins to look more like a cabana or locomotive. I believe, however, that it is in this respect, artistic autonomy, that we find the most

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healing energies, the most exaltation of the human mind. So writing becomes a kind of selfish altruism: *Dear*

Reader, I am being selfish for your good. Earlier, you mentioned the work of Joseph Cornell. Since we are on the subject of cabinets, I would say Cornell's boxes, each with its enchanted interior, intuitive and strange but fully transparent, is precisely the kind of theater I find in your work. How do you feel about this?

NL: Minds most in need of healing will not be, I think, by our language experiments. This is their indulgence. Let me emend that complaint, John, to exclude the minds of a few well-disposed readers and the experimenter's own—those can be healed or at least made jubilant. My work makes me supremely happy; perhaps this is, ultimately, its apology. But let us move on to a consideration of the forms of enchantment—Cornell's boxes being, as you point out, one of them. I like your word enchanted, by the way; I would, in my work, enchant if nothing else. Cornell's boxes (miniature theater

sets in themselves) use *trompe l'oeil* effects, props, and a proscenium arch to frame the mysterious actions inside their intensely theatrical spaces in order to stop time, to re-create space, and to render—in Klee's words—the invisible visible. The viewer is seduced into their worlds, not in the way of realism (which erases the difference between the work's and the viewer's worlds), but in the way of magic (which astonishes by

italicizing the difference). Stage or box—the viewer is asked to consider, from his remove, the elements of the design. Neither Cornell nor Klee nor Ionesco abandoned the viewer's world (and view-point) entirely; none produced hermetic works of art. There is always an evocation of life—real, imagined, or dreamed: the life of the viewer and the artist. (I think in this regard of Robert Wilson's theater of tableaux. Although I have not been able to see for myself *Einstein on the Beach* or another of his operas in which we are deceived into experiencing time itself in a new way, I have read much about him and his work.) In my sequence of short texts, *Joseph Cornell's Operas*, I recreate Cornell's boxes as operas or operatic settings, which they certainly are.

Artifice is attractive to me. It enables me to work—to tool—the surfaces of my fiction to a degree many may condemn as *rococo*. I admit to liking Fabergé eggs and paintings by Fragonard. I have considered myself as an Illusionist in that I use the devices of illusion; but if one thinks clearly about illusion, my work—and yours, John—is not Illusionistic, because it does not represent the world. It does not ask the reader to believe, or pretend, that it is the real world: It makes its own; that is, it makes *another* reality. Paradoxically, the more completely a work succeeds at being mistaken for the thing itself (rather than becoming a thing in itself), the more illusionary it is; the

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more it lies. I am not opposed to lies—call them artifices—in art so long as we are aware of the forced perspective, the *papier-mâché* statue of the prince, the painted balsa-wood ball in a box, suggesting a planet but never wishing to represent it. Insofar as we can confuse a Hemingway novel with reality, it is Illusionistic; insofar as it is impossible to mistake a Vonnegut one with reality, it is Realistic. I may be perverse in this. What do you think?

JO: For me it has always been a matter of presence. The more radically a work insists on its own reality, and burlesques or distorts

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the elements of its composition, which have been borrowed from the so-called real world, the more immediate and tangible it seems. Theodore Adorno remarks on this same paradox. He asks, “How can making bring into appearance what is not the result of making; how can what according to its own concept is not true nevertheless be true?” Central to aes-

thetics therefore is the redemption of semblance, although redemption through semblance is itself illusory. The head spins trying to assimilate all this. There are some lines in your novel *A History of the Imagination*, in the chapter titled “The Laughter of Women,” that goes to the heart of this. Here, you are addressing Raymond Roussel, author of the *Impressions of Africa*, which is not about Africa, and who, wherever he traveled, would stay within the confines of his cabin, aboard a steamship docked at Mombasa:

“You are inventing again!” I heard the voice of the delegation say; but I closed my mind to it, so

that it faded from my mind to be replaced by the laughter of women—women who are the color of coffee, of night, and also of pink erasers.

“Why don’t you open the shutters?” I repeated because he had not bothered to answer me.

“So as not to be distracted,” he replied irritably.

“My work has nothing to do with *that!*”

“But your African impressions...” I began.

“Have nothing to do with Africa!” he snapped.

“With what then?”

“With words! Words to be dismembered, broken into pieces, and built up into something that ‘has never been, which alone interests us.’”

I just love that! That says it all. I may have that rendered in needlepoint and hung on the wall just above my desk.

You know, when you mentioned *Joseph Cornell’s Operas*, I hadn’t realized that this was one of your works, which I Googled up and found at *elimae books*. It’s a joy to discover some new Lock to unlock. New for me, at any rate. How do you feel about work being made available online as opposed to the more traditional print medium?

NL: This idea of art as a “making,” as a thing made—it speaks immediately to my disinclination toward online publication. I have a prejudice against it, which may be common for those of my generation; I do not trust it—do not entirely trust technology, for the obvious reasons. Electricity is evanescent; paper and ink give to the thing made permanence, which is, I am aware, illusory. And yet, perhaps not: We have old books, incunabula, writing set down on manuscripts, paper, parchment, stone tablets. It survives because of its autonomous life; it is not attached to an exterior life-support system, whose plug can be pulled. (I suspect one day it will.) Not that I believe my work of a quality or importance deserving

immortality, or what passes for it in an age of smirking faithlessness. I do not, but I like to think of its surviving its author a little while. The medium is not the message, but some media are more fitting than

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others to carry the burden of meaning and delight. And I am, like many of us, enamored of the fragrance and feel of paper, of the angularity of cover and binding, the pleasant heft of a book. These are sensuous pleasures not to be had in a

printout. *Joseph Cornell's Operas* has been for some years now online at elimae.com, by the generosity of its editor, my friend Cooper Renner, who succeeded *elimae's* founder, Deron Bauman. I would not have wished them posted if they had not appeared elsewhere as books.

I, too, am fond of the Roussel story, "The Laughter of Women." My favorite sentence in it (perhaps in the entire book) is one I recite to myself daily: "Roussel at his writing desk, bravely refusing news of the outside world." It is what I do now that I can no longer bear thinking about the world.

JO: What does one say about those of your fictions that purport to be written by someone else, for which you are said to have performed the service of discoverer, literary executor, editor, or translator?

NL: In *Marco Knauff's Universe*, *Land of the Snow Men*, and *Cirque du Calder*, I was happy to invent not only a story but also its author as a means of deepening the fiction, of enriching it with a secondary text. In each of these books, the putative author is treated to a biography. To fictionalize the fiction-maker is an imposture, a deception, a hoax, an artifice—and what is fiction if not these?

JO: In *The Long Rowing Unto Morning*, your recent novel, published by Ravenna Press, you write as Norman Lock; but the narrative

norman lock

voice you employ is a woman's, albeit one who, in Brian Evenson's words, exhibits "an uncertain arrangement of the mind." I presume that this experiment (for it is, in its fluent structure and odd patterning of language, a non-Naturalistic novel) is in aid of your notion of object-making—of writer as cabinet maker.

NL: Yes. That book—perhaps everything I write—is an act of disenthralment.

JO: Disenthralment from what?

NL: From my self.