

INTERVIEW



A CONVERSATION WITH LYNDA BARRY

ELISSA SCHAPPELL

She's an artist, a cult hero, and a low-impact dirt freak

For nearly thirty years Lynda Barry's raw, funky, squiggly-lined style of drawing has set her apart from other graphic artists, but it is her crack-you-up-til-soda-squirts-out-your-nose humor, dosed with social satire and spot-on observations of the cruelty and awkwardness of adolescence that have made her one of the most important and inspiring figures in the graphic fiction world. For generations of women artists and writers she's a trailblazing hero.

For twenty years her cartoons (such as the classic *Poodle With a Mohawk*) have appeared in *Esquire* and *Mother Jones*, while her strip *Ernie Pook's Comeek* has been a staple in alternative weeklies around the country. The strip, depicting the harrowing, often hilarious dysfunctional family life of Marlys, Maybonne, and Freddie Mullen, takes on every stripe of intolerance with Barry throwing some sharp, politically left-

wing elbows. The same themes and energy permeate her graphic novels, among them *Cruddy*, *The Good Times Are Killing Me*, and *One Hundred Demons*. Barry's artwork—her paintings, collages, and watercolors—possess a more surreal, hallucinogenic quality than her other work, inhabited as they are by strange fantastical creatures and shadowy images which insinuate themselves into your consciousness and linger there like a message sent in a dream.

Barry grew up in Seattle and attended Evergreen State College where she met bosom companion Simpson's creator Matt Groening. Currently she and her husband live in rural Wisconsin. "My husband and I say we are BuddhAmish. We are very low, low impact farm people. My husband does natural habitat restoration, we have a native plant nursery, we heat with wood, cook with wood, no dryer. I'm a total dirt



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freak,” she insists, “and not at all a groovy person.”

At Barry’s suggestion our interview was conducted on-line and began as such:

“Well, why not just start whenever you like, and it can be like a conversation, one question at a time and then moving on from that. It’s so much nicer than thinking up a list of questions or getting a list of questions---at least for me it is!

“So, got a question?”

“I especially like lame questions! Dumb questions! YEAH!”

So here goes . . .

ELISSA SCHAPPELL: When you started drawing as a kid, was there one artist you imitated?

LYNDA BARRY: The first person I wanted to draw like was Dr. Seuss, and I find myself coming back to him again and again, still copying. I think copying someone’s work is the fastest way to learn certain things about drawing and line. It’s funny how there is such a taboo against it. I learned everything from just copying other people’s work. Trying to get that carefree Dr. Seuss line is hard!

In junior high came the Bic pen copies of Peter Max and R. Crumb’s work. By the time I had notebooks to carry around I was in the seventh grade and that was the beginning of my seeking the hippies and all the hippie art I could find. I thought the hippies would set me free. I was kind of right!

R. Crumb was another one I copied. His drawing style totally knocked me out, but it also totally freaked me out. The sex stuff was scary to me, but the drawing style was beautiful and I copied it and copied it. Once I was able to start wandering on my own and going to the library and to Skid Row head shops I was able to find more things to copy.

And I loved drawing Rat Finks! Man, I loved Big Daddy Roth. There was something about his embrace of ugliness that made me feel freedom. He included flies in his drawings! Rat Fink became my idol. I kind of felt like a Rat Fink, I think.

There were no books in our house. Not really any books at all. No kids’ books. No adult books. Not even a dictionary. I mostly got books from the library or read magazines my mom brought home from the hospital where she was a housekeeper—a lot of *Reader’s Digest* or the *Playboys* my dad hid but not very well.

ES: So how did you get turned on to reading/writing?

LB: In beautiful public school. In a beautiful, magical, safe, book-filled public school. My elementary school was a block away from the house and I hung out there like it was my yard. And there was the public library bookmobile in the summertime. They were really nice about loaning books out to kids whose parents were not around. My mom considered this a liability and made me stop. She said if I lost one, how would we pay for it?

But I think the truth is she hated that I liked to read. To her it was like I was just sitting in one place for two hours staring at a pineapple. It really drove her insane and I learned never to let her catch me reading, because if she saw me she'd make me do housework. I could, however, watch all the TV I wanted. I could also play endless games of solitaire. Just no books. No paper. No pencils or pens.

She never had any books when she was growing up in the Philippines, and during the war her schooling was interrupted when she had to go into hiding during the Japanese occupation, and one of the saddest side effects of living through it was that she was unable to stand for my brothers and me to have anything she didn't have when she was our age. I always thought it made her really crazy, being a kid in wartime. She was nine when the invasion happened.

I think about all the kids in Iraq and what kind of craziness will follow them into adulthood and through their parent-

ing into their children. A week of war lasts for generations. I'm convinced of this. To look at me, you'd never think I have containers inside filled with the experience of being a starving kid during WWII in the Philippines, but I do.

I loved reading but I never thought about being a writer because I could not spell. I cannot spell. I will never be able to really spell. People love to say that spelling doesn't matter, but getting high school teachers to take you seriously in English classes when you can't spell makes it matter quite a bit. I tried so hard to get into different creative writing classes or special English classes, but I was always refused. It drove me nuts. I'm still mad about it. Like *Carrie*-style mad.

ES: Who was the first character you tried to draw?

LB: The first character I can remember drawing was a *Playboy* Bunny creature. I drew these rabbit-girls in one-piece bathing suits with peek-a-boo hairstyles, high rabbit ears, and powder-puff tails. They were not at all curvy and they had paws for hands and feet. These were a huge hit at school.

It's hard for me to believe how much drawing and reading and writing were discouraged in my house while I was growing up. My mother was actually upset by me reading, and she hated for me to use up paper. I got screamed at a lot for using up paper. The only blank paper in the house was hers, and if she found out I touched

it she'd go crazy. I sometimes stole paper from school and even that made her mad. I think it's why I hoard paper to this day. I have so much blank paper everywhere, in every drawer, on every shelf, and still when I need a sheet I look in the garbage first. I agonize over using a "good" sheet of paper for anything. I have good drawing paper I've been dragging around for twenty years because I'm not good enough to use it yet. Yes, I know this is insane.

So what I did instead was collage—even though I didn't know the name of it then. I remember great pleasure in cutting out Andy Cap and Flo with manicure scissors, and then cutting little slits in magazine picture of a big bowl of Beef-a-Roni, and fitting Andy and Flo into them so it looked like they were rising out of the Beef-a-Roni. I remember laughing my head off at that one. I still love collage and I've always turned to it when I get stuck writing or drawing.

ES: I don't know how many graphic artists have the problem of people assuming that their comic strips are autobiographical, but surely people want to believe that about your work.

LB: The most autobiographical work I've done has been in *100 Demons*. I grew up in a Filipino family. My dad split when I was twelve. My mom's side of the family all speaks Tagalog and there were always various Filipino relatives living with us, a lot of them just coming to the U.S. and speaking rough English. All our food was Fili-

pino except for TV dinners, and the style of living was very much first generation American. Quite different from Marlys and Arna! But I love that people refuse to believe that the comic strips that have Marlys in them are not about me. They must seem very real somehow. I guess it's a compliment.

It's funny that people really do think of my work as autobiographical, but I've always had a harder time writing/drawing stories about things that happened to me. I do write them but I don't especially like to show anyone. Some images are for other people and some are not. It's kind of like a kid playing. Sometimes playing is a very private thing that actually can't happen unless the private part is there. Playing isn't for others.

Writing and drawing (I include collage in this) are something I do all day long. I'd say very little of it is for other people. I'm always kind of surprised when I do make something I want to show someone.

ES: What comics did you read when you were a kid? Did any character in particular speak to you? I was plagued by the very disturbing zombie-like gaze of Dondi. Ditto Charlie Brown's head. I grew up in the radon panhandle where everybody got cancer, and to me he looked like he'd had chemotherapy.

LB: DONDI! I can't believe you said DONDI! Because I can't find anyone who remembers him, his eyes the opposite of Orphan Annie's eyes! He was kind of my

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age! He had a weird name and his parents had weird names. What was their deal? Were they spies? I remember feeling I had to read him because he was the only actually cute guy my age in the comics.

Everyone else liked Charlie Brown, but Dondi had kind of the cuteness of an actual boy, even though to hang around someone who was that confused, constantly confused, would have been hard.

My secret shame is that I wanted to love *Peanuts* much more than I did. I don't know why that strip and I never got together. I tried! I even lied about loving it! I knew *Peanuts* was cool! And I wanted to be cool! But I was always happier reading *Family Circus*. I'm wondering if it wasn't because there was a real sense of depression in *Peanuts* for me. Charlie Brown scared the hell out of me when I think about it, mostly because of his giving up, his loser-ness—that was too close! The depression in that strip was too alive for me.

On a side note—my little brother smoked pot when he was in the fifth grade and I hadn't done it. I was thirteen. I said, "What's it like?"

He said, "Your body feels like Bullwinkle in the Macy's Day parade, but your head feels like Dondi."

It's still the best explanation I've heard.

ES: Were there any cartoons you really had to grow into, where it wasn't until you were older that you understood why they existed?

LB: I had strips I wanted to grow into, hoped I would start to like, because I liked reading comics a lot and the main source for me was the daily paper. I tried very hard to get into *Apartment 3-G*, and *Gasoline Alley*, and even *Prince Valiant* (whose hair I also hated)—I'd read them, but they never hooked me.

I never did grow into R. Crumb's sex drawings, and I am still scared of Little Annie Fanny and Granny Saggy.

ES: I found the *Lockhorns* upsetting. I still don't like it, though it does feel like real cultural commentary, like *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

LB: *Lockhorns* was upsetting to me too. I was in a family that was coming apart and it was just too horrible to see the reflection of that in the paper. Too close!

I met the *Lockhorns* lady, by the way. She had beautiful posture and a perfect nose. I told her I loved her profile. She told me she would give me the name of her plastic surgeon. She seemed to glide when she

walked. Isn't that wild? She struck me as elegant, with a very dry sense of humor. I keep wanting to say her name is Bunny, but I must be imagining this part.

ES: How does the graphic element dovetail with the narrative for you? Do you make the drawings first or second, or along with the story?

LB: I make them at the same time. The exact same time. There isn't a plan beforehand. I very rarely pencil anything in or have a single idea before I start. There is something about just grinding the ink and moving the brush around that makes a comic strip come. I'm always surprised that it works this way, but it does.

ES: How are your approaches to writing and making art different, if they are different?

LB: The difference is scant because I use a brush to write fiction too. I can't write on a computer, not until I'm copying out the final draft do I put it on a computer. It's too easy to delete the thing that doesn't seem to fit—which often turns out to be the true story forming.

When I got stuck trying to write *Cruddy* on the computer I had an idea to try to write it with a small paintbrush on notebook paper. I was really at a point where I felt I had nothing to lose. What surprised me was how the story just started to form so much faster and so much more vividly than it had when I was just tapping my

fingers around on a keyboard.

I got pretty excited about this brush-writing thing and wondered if anyone else had figured it out. Yeah, turns out about three thousand years ago in China they started to figure out this brush-and-ink-and-image thing. It's opened up an entire world to me, one that is much connected with Buddhism and Zen, by the way.

This discovery of the brush world has probably been the most important thing that's happened to me in my adult life.

ES: What is the actual creative process like for you?

LB: I sit down, grind my ink, set my timer for an hour, and take my paintbrush and go. I try to stay behind the story, never leading it. I'm kind of like the world's slowest secretary.

I also have a rule that I never ever think about the story unless I'm actually working on it. It seems like an unlikely way to work, but it's pretty efficient. When I teach it to people they are always really surprised at how it actually does work. One key thing is to limit the amount of time you have to work, and to work every day. I do work every day. I don't feel very good when I don't. I also make lots and lots of stories and pictures no one ever sees. That also seems to be a vital part of this mysterious work with images.

ES: I'd like to try your method, but I'm afraid my subconscious is a lazy creature who, if she weren't constantly whipped,

would lie on a fainting couch all day drinking martinis and eating candy.

LB: Actually, the way I see it, is that the part of your mind that is convinced it is driving does *not* want you to know that this work will happen anyway, because then it's out of a job.

ES: If you're not consciously thinking about the work, do you still have that experience I sometimes have when I'm working, where suddenly the universe begins offering you gifts? You know, a song on the radio cues an image, or a bit of overheard conversation gives you a new way into a character?

LB: You know, to me it's not a gift at all. It's the direct result of playing around with images. Practicing a state of mind with a physical activity. I don't have a mysterious attitude about any of it. It seems pretty natural. It's sort of like not playing hopscotch until you are at the hopscotch place. Thinking isn't what makes a story. It *is* what makes an alibi, but not a story.

ES: When you talk about resisting the computer because, as you say, "It's too easy to delete the thing that doesn't seem to fit—which often turns out to be the true story forming"—is that in any way part of what Ginsberg called "First thought best thought," or is it something different? The idea that the thing that makes you uncomfortable is actually the true beating heart of the story?

LB: Dang. Sure sounds like it to me!

ES: Can you say a little something about the imagery in your collages?

LB: On one of the pieces that's in this issue, I wrote that I believed images were the soul's immune system and transit system. Those are two very different things, an immune system and a transit system. One is very much inside a person and one is outside. I use images for both purposes.

These are pictures I made because painting feels very good to me. I make a lot of pictures and some of them cross over from being private into being something I'm very happy to sell on eBay for \$75.

I like to keep prices for original art very low, because I think it's sad that only rich people can afford art, and I don't believe they use a lot of the art they buy. Also, I HATE GALLERIES! I hate the whole art scene. All of it feels like an intensive care unit to me. And it makes art have to be this THING that feels unnatural instead of it being the MOST natural thing in the world. 🖼️