

Playing with the Image

Lynda Barry on Dr. Bronner's, eyeballs and folk dancing



Lynda Barry calls this "A self-portrait of Near-Sighted Monkey, my alter ego"

I can't remember when I started reading Lynda Barry's "Ernie Pook's Comeek," but I have always loved the great cast of characters, the dead-on kids' voices and the glories of Fred! Milton! Number! One! Beat! Poodle! And I've enjoyed her books, from *Cruddy* to the marvelous *One! Hundred! Demons!* to the memoir/graphic novel/workbook from Drawn and Quarterly Press, *What It Is*, which recently won an Eisner Award — a sort of Oscar for graphic novels.

Barry grew up in the Midwest and Pacific Northwest and now lives in Wisconsin. She'll read from *What It Is* at the Eugene Public Library at 6 pm Friday, Aug. 7, during the First Friday Art Walk, and she's running a first-come, first-served free creativity workshop on Saturday, Aug. 8 (sign up in person at the library starting at 10 that morning!). Barry, a gracious, generous and quite speedy interviewee, wrote answers to these questions by email.

Congrats on your Eisner! Do you think it will change your writing life?

Well, I am totally thrilled about the Eisner. Giddy even. It's really wonderful. But the thing that has really changed my writing life the most is working with Drawn and Quarterly. They actually printed *What It Is*, which is a hard book to describe, and it's hard to say where it goes in a bookstore right away. I'm lucky they took a chance on me and were willing to publish such a strange book. Just knowing I can make unusual books certainly changes my writing life.

You've made exclamation points acceptable again.

A friend of mine pointed out that one of my main literary influences must be the labels on Dr. Bronner's liquid soap, and it's true. I love the jerky writing and all the exclamation marks on those soap labels. In my comic strip, Marlys is especially fond of exclamation marks.

Can you talk a little bit about the process of putting *What It Is* together?

It's based on a writing workshop I teach

called "Writing the Unthinkable." I use a way of working I learned from my teacher, Marilyn Frasca, at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington. This was in the late '70s. I've been using it ever since, and I love to teach it to people.

I wanted to make a book about writing that wasn't writing about how to write. I kind of wanted to make something that would make people itch to make something themselves. Collage does that. It's something I've always turned to since I was a kid and took my mother's cuticle scissors and cut out the comic strip characters in the newspaper and then pasted them onto magazine photos from *Good Housekeeping*, mostly pictures of food. I have a vivid memory of cutting out a tiny Andy Capp and his wife Flo and then pasting them onto a plate of spaghetti in a way that made them look like they were sinking. For some reason this made me laugh so hard. I was probably about 7.

Even now when I'm lost and not sure which way to go with my work I'll do collage. I like making spooky and creepy collages. Lots of eyeballs pasted on anything will always look good. You can't go wrong with pasting eyeballs on things.

I took my car in to be repaired, and I had your book with me. The car repair estimate guy was like, "Wait, LYNDIA BARRY IS COMING TO THE LIBRARY?" My journalism students also love it. Did you have an audience in mind when you were creating this book?

Man, am I honored that the car repair estimate guy said that. One of the tricks I learned early on for figuring out what I thought about a painting that was in a gallery was to imagine it hanging in the garage at a gas station with guys working on cars in the same room. I can give paintings in that atmosphere a chance.

When I'm in a gallery, I always feel kind of tired and uncomfortable. But I love the chance art I get to see in work areas. Also

cafés. I think cafés and coffee shops are great places to show and look at art. You get to sit down by the pictures. You get to read something in the newspaper and then look up at the picture again. If you get to hang around the art, you can see how fluid it is, how a picture changes depending on what's on your mind, or how awake or tired you are.

You said on NPR's "Talk of the Nation" that "the only movement left for adults is exercise, which is the saddest movement of all time." What do you think the world would be like if adults were a little more free?

To me, folk dancing is probably the happiest movement of all time. I just lucked into a lot of it. When I got to high school I had a gym teacher who seemed about 300 years old to me; her name was Miss Frisbee. And she was way into Mesopotamian folk dancing. She had these freaky little leather shoes with curled toes and all of these little drums and bells, and the records she played had such a crazy sound to them. This was in 1974 at a mostly black high school in Seattle. Miss Frisbee's class wasn't popular, but it beat regular gym classes. It was an option, and I took it, and I'm so glad I did.

I think these old folk dances have something very big in them. The kind of movement they contain is transformative and restorative. When country line dancing was starting to be a big thing, I'd hear people put it down. Cool people hated country line dancing. But I was so excited by it. It meant that anyone in the room could get up there and move around to the Boot Scootin' Boogie. They could be all different shapes and sizes. Even that crazy chicken dance makes me happy. The Electric Slide makes me happy. Cool people are wrong about so many things.

Can you say a bit about the monsters and the little ones that say "Is it good?" and "Does it suck?"

I learned pretty early on that trying to figure out if the work was good or bad was the one thing that would keep the work from happening faster than anything else. It's interesting being around little kids who don't have that worry yet, and then being

around them when that worry comes. And it always comes. The trick is to know that worry is optional. The work will happen without it; actually it will happen much better without it.

But at some point that question is going to be there. Is what I've made good or is it bad? Sometimes I imagine the part of me that worries, that says "This is going nowhere. This is stupid. This is a waste of time. You should be cleaning the house," sometimes I imagine the person saying that to me is a really awful drunk guy in a bar. Then I clearly know he's a jackass. But when he's in my head, he's the voice of reason. So when did that happen? When did the drunk jackass become the voice of reason?

What ways would you suggest school systems change to make the process of creativity still feel possible, joyful and real as kids turn into adults?

Wow, that question makes me as happy as when I first saw that book called *If I Ran the Circus*. I'd get all kids started on folk dancing immediately. It's as important as learning how to write. It is kind of like writing, only your body is the pencil and what's below your feet is the paper. I'd get music right in there at the same time, and art, art, art. I'd bookend any kind of thinking-related learning with body-related learning. And I would keep one class for kids all the way up to the age of 16. I wouldn't send anyone to middle school ever. I think middle school is terrible idea that comes at the worst possible time.

If I ran the school system I would rain down bags and bags and bags of money on public schools and make them great, and make teachers want to work there.

What do you want people to know about the book?

That they can make one just like it. And it's OK to copy. It's great to copy. It's also great to trace. All of the things that are supposed to be bad if you're an artist are actually very good if you just want to mess around. It's also good to make something and then throw it away. **EW**

Read a much longer, more detailed Q&A (Wind farm protests! Whisky! Monsters! More folk dancing!) at blogs.eugeneweekly.com/suzi

Treacherous Love

Amelia Gray's *AM/PM* (Featherproof Books, \$12.95) consists of 120 impeccably compact stories of love, discomfort and concert souvenirs. The single-page stories were written, one in the morning and one in the evening, over the course of two months. This timeline, and their brevity, may make it sound like this is a simple little book, but it's not; like the best tiny tales and single lines, Gray's snapshot stories are treacherous and sly, capable of changing the cadence of your thoughts and tinting the way you look at the ordinary things around you.

It takes some time to realize characters are reappearing; each story is so specific that it seems the people within have been captured so firmly in a single scene that they may have no others. It's a relief and a surprise to find them again, a few pages later: Tess, who realizes strange things about meat and fears dying alone. June, who eats her plain dinner with her eyes closed and wakes up covered in seeds. A page of fears; the tension between Martha and Emily; one line from Terrence to June. It's enough to make me wonder what scene, what tiny exchange in my most ordinary day could define me so, if caught in the right words. Amelia Gray probably could find those words. Her visions are direct, devastating, funny and vibrant; it's not everyone who can find such inspiration in a John Mayer concert T-shirt, which becomes as much a character as any human. *AM/PM* begins with the weight of words and of jobs; it ends with Emily, who's getting paranoid: "Each shadow meant something different and strange, an unfamiliar animal or a line of weapons. These visions were terrifying, but after they went away, she felt a strange kind of peace that those things existed in the world, that her world was powerful enough to conjure them. *My world*, she thought."

Amelia Gray and Meagan Evans read at 8 pm Saturday, Aug. 8, at Wandering Goat. Free. — Molly Templeton

