

Interview With Karen Lillis, from her interview series *The Art of The Book Review*.
(August 20, 2012)

This is the third in a new interview series, The Art of the Book Review, about writing book reviews in today's literature world. I'm taking on reviewers of the small press, many of whom are also writers in the small press. Previous interviews have been with fiction author Spencer Dew and poet Barrett Warner.

Today I'm excited to introduce **Lynn Alexander**, one of the hardest working women in the small press. A writer and a poet, she also co-edits Blink Ink, writes and edits at Red Fez, is involved with the Outsider Writers Collective, and is the producer and editor-in-chief of Full of Crow, a multi-faceted literary engine. Full of Crow produces quarterly reviews of fiction and poetry; publishes chapbooks, ebooks, and zines; hosts a blog, poetry podcasts, interviews, and online book reviews; distributes micro-press books and journals; and generates various other literary projects including periodic readings around the US.

I wanted to include Lynn in this series in part because her review style is unique: It's often descriptive of what the work is doing and how it is structured, while it shies away from labeling or validating a book as "good vs bad," "a great read," "compelling," etc.

Karen: How do Crow Reviews fit in with the Full of Crow mission?

Lynn: Full Of Crow is over three years old now, and like the people involved, the direction has evolved and changed over time. The reviews section was actually a suggestion that I was resistant to and explaining why will get into some areas of the other questions.

The mission at Crow has always been to create a space for words, because of our sense that these spaces matter. I believe in and support the independent press; I also like the idea of openness and access to all without predetermined ideas about who has legitimacy as a writer and who does not. In the end, it is about the work, which must speak for itself. The idea of a reviews section came from a desire to discuss aspects of work in the independent press, but in particular--work that we enjoyed and did not see represented in well-known publications. As we all know, breaking into any circle is difficult and Crow Reviews was meant to be a place for the appreciation and exploration of what we were reading, whether known or obscure.

That said, I have mixed feelings about the idea of a "review" in the commonly held sense of the word. I acknowledge that I don't have formal expertise and try to approach reviews from the perspective of a reader, reflective of my experience with the work. On one hand, I think that all people are "qualified" to read and develop thoughts about the work they read and intuitive perception is very valuable. On the other hand, reviews are often seen as a person's assessment of merit and validity, a process of making a decision and subsequent case for or against work and the value brought to the table.



So I feel that all are qualified and capable to review in some sense and many do, but ironically--I feel that it is a presumptuous undertaking to decide what has merit and what does not. In other words, we are all entitled to our opinions as readers, but I am less inclined to say that our opinions should be asserted in the sense of giving work a thumbs-up or -down, versus an impression. Review, criticism, and literary analysis involve different agendas and I was reluctant to use the term “reviews.” I don’t think it accurately reflects what I hope to accomplish, particularly now. But there are few outlets for “exploratory essays.” Looking back, maybe I would have stuck to my guns and tried to shape the space accordingly.

If there aren’t many outlets for independent or small press “reviews” there are even fewer for the directions that I like to go in.

My preference is to discuss work, write about work, analyze and dissect elements of the work--but I stop short of saying THIS IS VALID.

I have answered to some criticism about this, told that a review is supposed to rate the merit, and whether or not others should buy [the book]. That is a “review.” And I get that. But I can’t seem to see myself in that self-appointed position. Independent Press often involves the interactions of peers, and the review relationship goes against what I hope to see as the ongoing emphasis of Full Of Crow which is an approach of openness and humility and acknowledging that people have different subjective opinions. You might hate what I love, but let’s talk about what speaks to us and why, let’s talk about the work and what we find there. If doing that encourages people to read the work or have a different understanding of the writer’s execution, that is enough for me.

But in the end, I hope that people read what we have to say and then pursue their own experience with the work, whether positive or negative.

If I had to summarize, I would say it comes down to the difference between analysis and judgment. I am more comfortable with analysis and even criticism, judgment is a different beast. Criticism involves study and subsequent evaluation, judgment is the subjective act of telling the world that something sucks because you say so. I want less of that, and more reflection.

Karen. How do you think reviews complement or complicate the community aspect of the small press?

Lynn: “Community” is wonderful and necessary, but we have to be practical about the dynamics of the writer in context of a community. Some are able to support the work of others and embrace the value and need for community while others cannot. Some will look to what the community can do for them, and think little about what they can give. Motive, ego need, and agenda vary widely. Reviews can therefore be a way to encourage interest and thought about the work of others, or they can be currency. Reviews can be thoughtful, reflective experiences or they can be platitudes. Certainly, negative reviews can cause conflict in a community just as positive comments can demonstrate loyalty. All of these complicate community.

My thought is that what complements community is an effort to understand what others are doing, to read the work carefully, and offer up something that suggests sincere interest and engagement in the process and outcome. Even when we get it wrong, I think we need to also advocate for the work of independent writers and publishers by articulating WHY we find the work to be compelling. I’m amazed by what I read, and I think in our “reviews,” however approached, we need to address the criticism that independent/small press is synonymous with failure, or lack of ambition, or lack of quality, or lack of purposeful art--a default region where “anybody” can thrive without effort. If nothing else, I want to show that as a reader, I see the writer's effort and time.

I think that [approach] complements community more than anything else accomplished by a “review.” It gives proper credit to the talent around us.



Karen: Describe your method of reviewing and how you perceive this to be useful.

Lynn: In a sense, many of us “review” every day when trying to decide on content for a publication. I read hundreds of stories and poems each month between the submissions at Full

Of Crow and *Red Fez*, and part of the editorial process at *Red Fez* involves providing feedback on submissions. But this involves a different mindset, as we are selecting from a pool of submissions for a limited space and we have to rationalize the decisions somehow. Many of us acknowledge that this is difficult on matters of taste and style.

When writing a review or essay on a book or collection, I often consider the pieces in aggregate and the intended recipient of my review is not necessarily the author, but other readers like myself. I am not filtering potential content, I am coming from the point of view of a reader and try to approach it accordingly. The process is necessarily intense for both cases but with a different objective.

To take an example, I recently wrote about John Swain's chapbook "White Vases" and I read it cover to cover at least five times. I never write anything after the initial first read, even though that is truly where my emotional response takes shape. I don't want to focus on my emotional response, so I put it away, and take it out later. I try to identify what I see as common themes and how the structure conveys them--sticking with the text. I try to point to examples and I am not above getting out a dictionary and looking a few things up. I try to answer the primary question- what I think the writer was trying to accomplish, and how they set about doing so.

I'm not sure if this process is useful, no doubt it sounds tedious, but I think my goal is to move toward more useful reviews that move beyond "this is AWESOME." If I think a writer brings "the goods" I don't think you should take my word for it. I think it should be evident by the examples cited, let the text speak for itself.

I don't claim to be a good "reviewer." I know that I have to keep working at it, but I think the best way to do that is to keep making the effort to understand why certain pieces resonate.

Karen: Where do you read reviews? What do you hope to find in a review? Do you hope for an engaging essay, or are you seeking a specific type of info or opinion on the book in question?

Lynn: I like to read reviews in independent press publications like *Big Bridge* and *Red Fez*, and in some print publications like *Rain Taxi*. What I hope to find is definitely an engaging essay that demonstrates some level of familiarity with the work and genre, that sense that the reviewer is open to what the writer is trying to do, whether you are partial to the structure or not .

For example, you can't impose your expectations of traditional writing on an experimental artist, and proceed to rip the work apart as "nonsense"--that seems like a bad fit. The author's intentions might not match your expectations, and there might be reasons for particular choices that are dismissed when you take a narrow view of what they hoped to achieve.

In the end, like I said, we all have the right to our subjective experience. If something reads as nonsense to you, own that. But don't hold it up against a rubric of elements that don't apply.