The! Great! Lynda! Barry!

INTERVIEW BY AUDREY BILGER PHOTOS BY JEFFERY WALLS

IN THE WORLD OF alternative comics, Marlys, Maybonne, Freddie, and company are as well-known as mainstream characters Charlie Brown, Linus, and Snoopy. Lynda Barry's distinctively offbeat strip, "Ernie Pook's Comeek," has been garnering fiercely loyal fans since its inception in the late 1970s, and her depictions of the wonders, traumas, and identity-shaping experiences of childhood and adolescence resonate with an authenticity that can be poignant, unsettling, and uplifting—by turns or all at the same time.

The story of Barry's entrance into the world of cartooning is the stuff of legend. She began drawing comics as a student at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, after a bad breakup; her strips about male-female relationships in which the men were drawn as cactuses (you know, hard to get close to) drew the admiration of Matt Groening (later to earn fame as the creator of "Life in Hell" and *The Simpsons*), who started printing her work—at first without her knowledge—in the school paper. Later, Groening would mention Barry's work in an article that got the attention of the editor of the *Chicago Reader*, who started printing "Ernie Pook." She went on to find other venues for her strip—she is currently syndicated to 35 alternative newsweeklies and has published a dozen books (most of which are, sadly, out of print)—and to support herself as an artist.

Not one to be confined to a single frame, Barry has also made her mark as a painter, illustrator, novelist, and playwright. Her unbridled imagination travels to places that are not for the faint of heart: from claustrophobic home life to abuse and incest, from everyday emotional upheavals of the schoolyard to mental illness, from interpersonal tensions to outright murder. Coming of age isn't easy for Barry's cast of characters; nonetheless, there are moments of clarity and beauty in the midst of chaos that make the journey well worth the pain. Her second novel, *Cruddy*, opens with a suicide note from 16-year-old narrator Roberta Rohbeson, and yet the very act of narrating her story—poised though it is between humor and horror—brings Roberta into a fictional existence so emphatic that she lives on beyond the ending.

The recently published collection *The! Greatest! of! Marlys!* showcases her most superlatively beloved character, ensconced in a world, universe, and galaxy that belong solely to this indomitable heroine. My interview with Barry emerged from a series of faxes over the course of almost the entire month of August; a self-proclaimed hermit, she favors an epistolary exchange, and gets the ball rolling with a self-portrait:

Before I start I'll give you a picture of where I am. I'm in a little office/back room of the house my husband and I have been working on for almost five years. My poodle Ed Martin is rolling around on the sofa and Lulu (the seven-pound rat terrier) just came in and licked my foot and Ooo-la (75-pound shelter-dog mix) walked in, stared at me, and walked out. They all come to see what I'm doing whenever I change rooms to work in.

I'm sitting at an old drawing table, my hair is wet, I'm wearing cut-offs and a t-shirt. I'm drinking coffee. My can of Copenhagen is right beside it, which reminds me I need to buy some Nicorette gum or whatever that stuff is, because I love to chew tobacco but I know it's really rotten for me.

I'm almost 45; I totally look my age. I'm on the short side with long reddish hair, round wire-rimmed glasses, little eyes, big double chin, pug nose. Tell it like it is. That's me.

How did you get started working as an artist?

My teacher Marilyn Frasca (at Evergreen State College) is [the person] who gave me the tools I needed to make my living as an artist. But I always enjoyed drawing and stories. I loved to read from early on. These things make a difference. She was the one who taught me about images, though, that it's the image that guides the work. And she taught me to get used to working very hard and also to get used to being alone. It's not something you can do with other people around. At least *I* can't. What I learned from her in college are exactly the same things I use today in order to work: working in a series, producing a lot of work, and allowing myself to not know what is going to happen next in the piece. Writing and painting and all art forms have to do with images. So I felt very free to be a painter and a cartoonist and a writer and a playwright and an illustrator because they were all the same at the core. I got that from her and that was the most important thing.

Do you think that it's harder for a woman to succeed as a cartoonist, or do men and women face similar challenges because it's such a marginalized genre?

There is no difference in difficulty when it comes to doing the actual work. There may be a difference when it comes to getting published, but I am so out of the scene that I really have no idea. That's part of hermit livin', I guess. My guess is, yes, it may be harder for women to get published if they are writing about wom-

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anish things and the editor who is picking cartoons is not into this topic at all because he's a guy. But I feel like I'm just guessing here. Being female has never been a problem for me that I know of, but it might be why I'm in so few papers. It could also be that my work is lame.

I just don't think about the men/women/humor thing. I used to. I used to think about issues like that a lot but it seemed fruitless to me after a while. Doing something is what makes a difference. I do my work. Life is so short. Acting and having creative experiences are what concern me now. I'm glad to be published, but being published is not why I work.

Is it difficult to be self-syndicated?

I send my own work out, but all that means is I copy it on the copier and put it in an envelope and put the address and stamp on the envelope. If you have a syndicate, they do that part for you, but I like having mindless tasks to do, and I don't like working with anyone on a regular basis. I don't promote my work. I never approach anyone to carry the strip. The papers ask me via fax or letter. It's not the most kick-ass business strategy, but it does leave a lot of room for life. I'm self-employed, but I'm always working.

You referred in another interview to reading D.W.

Winnicott's *Playing and Reality* on a regular basis. I can see some of the ways that his ideas about how childhood play connects to creativity show up in your work. Could you say a bit more about this connection?

First I want to say I'm really surprised you know who Winnicott is! And delighted. You've probably figured out he's one of my 700 gurus.

It's his idea (and he's probably not the only one) that there is a similarity in the state of mind children have while engaged in play and the state of mind adults have while engaged in creative work. I found this to be a huge hopeful clue to helping me along with my work. In a way, the state of mind (for lack of a better term) is everything. At least for me it is. If I'm in that state of mind, which is both focused and sort of absent-minded (open to internal suggestion or free association), it's much easier to follow the images that creative work is made of. I don't have to concentrate on the actual making of anything because the making is happening spontaneously. All I have to do is stay behind it. This is much easier than trying to think something up. It's the difference between logical, conscious process and sudden realization. Realizations are always much more fun and surprising. And actually, there is nothing sudden about them. They're the fruit of some fantastic back-of-the-mind action. They can't be planned. They can't be forced. They "come to us." This is one of the things Winnicott writes about in his poetic, elliptical way. I find that reading him is like reading haiku. A lot is said in few words and the meaning deepens with rereading.

Do you believe that childhood is a time when we're more open to playful creativity? Is your focus on childhood a way of accessing that source for yourself and for your audience?

People often ask me why I focus on childhood and adolescence. It's not anything I'm doing on purpose. It's what comes when I sit down to work. Those are the kinds of stories that unspool themselves, and I am thankful for any story that comes my way. I've had plenty of times when nothing at all comes and I'm left to make it up myself. That's when my work flattens out and isn't any fun to do. I know that in either case I'm making the story up myself, but when it comes from that state of mind that's like playing, the experience is much more satisfying, and I think the work is better, too.

Probably the thing I'm talking about is what some people call "the muse." Kids have a lot of contact with this muse, but it tapers off as we get older and our experiences pile up and we are less likely to visit that back-of-the-mind "deep dark wood" that is mentioned so often in fairy tales and even by Dante as he begins his journey into the Inferno. It's the place where we allow ourselves to become lost. Totally lost. And it's not a wonderful, loving place. The thing that people forget (and that Winnicott remembers for us) is that play always involves conflict and anxiety. When kids play with little plastic army men, they are not setting them up to have a sweet peacetime march through a nice little town. In the arena of play, there is destruction and death and all the things nightmares are made of. Will we come out of the woods alive? That is always the question. Hansel and Gretel made it out. But what happened to them in the woods is the same sort of thing that happened in *Silence of the Lambs*.

You've had to spend a good amount of time, especially since the publication of *Cruddy* and *The Freddie Stories*, justifying the so-called darkness in your work. Yet your work almost always offers a way out of darkness through humor or some sort of transcendence. Do you see humor and darkness as intertwined elements of the human? How do the two realms interact for you?

I don't feel I've had to justify the darkness in my work, ever. I do feel like I've had to explain it to people who were curious or frightened by it, and certainly my comic strip has been dropped from a lot of papers because of it. One of the relationships between humor and horror is a sudden surprising element that redefines the entire situation. Something so unexpected it makes us hysterical. Hysteria on the part of the experiencer (audience) is something you'll find in both extremely funny and extremely horrifying situations. Because of the way I love to work, that state of mind I mentioned, I leave myself open to the kinds of things that come up in stories and dreams. I not only leave myself open to them, I do everything I can to attract them (including having no business phone that interrupts my day, no clock in my studio, no hard schedule I follow). When they come, they are sometimes hilarious and sometimes terrifying, but they are always surprising and new, like a realization. It's one of the things I live for. I don't feel I need to justify that to anyone. But I'm more than happy to try to explain it. I think so many people want creative experience in their lives. What they don't know is that any creative work is going to lead them into the dark woods. But the dark woods are where it's at! Great things happen there. Amazing things. Things that make life rich. I'm very happy to give anyone who wants it the map I use to get lost.

If becoming totally lost is vital to creativity, then what are some of the things that serve as obstacles to this possibility?

The kind of lost I mean is a very focused kind of lost.

Kids have a lot of contact with the muse, but it tapers off as we get older and our experiences pile up and we are less likely to visit that back-of-the-mind "deep dark wood" that is mentioned so often in fairy tales.

There is a heightened sense when one is lost. In a certain way, one is never more there than when one is lost, because things become extremely vivid then. The trick is to be lost and relaxed at the same time. If you've ever traveled with a nervous person who tends to panic when things don't go precisely as planned, then you know one of the obstacles to creative work. Actually, it was traveling in Kenya that gave me a glimpse of what it could be like to be relaxed and alert to all that is going on. I was in a situation that was constantly absolutely new and out of my control. If I tried to judge the situation by what I knew or expected, I was always moving forward in a jerky way and I was very nervous because there were some moments that seemed insane to me (like riding in a little open *dhow*, a kind of boat, that was loaded with animal skins and empty Coke bottles to the point of sinking, piloted by a guy with bright red teeth and beef-jerky skin who didn't speak much English). I was traveling with two women I hardly knew, but both of them understood the mellow attitude one needs in travel, especially travel that is so far from one's experience. They taught me a lot about calming down and being very awake at the same time. It's that sort of state one needs when one is working creatively.

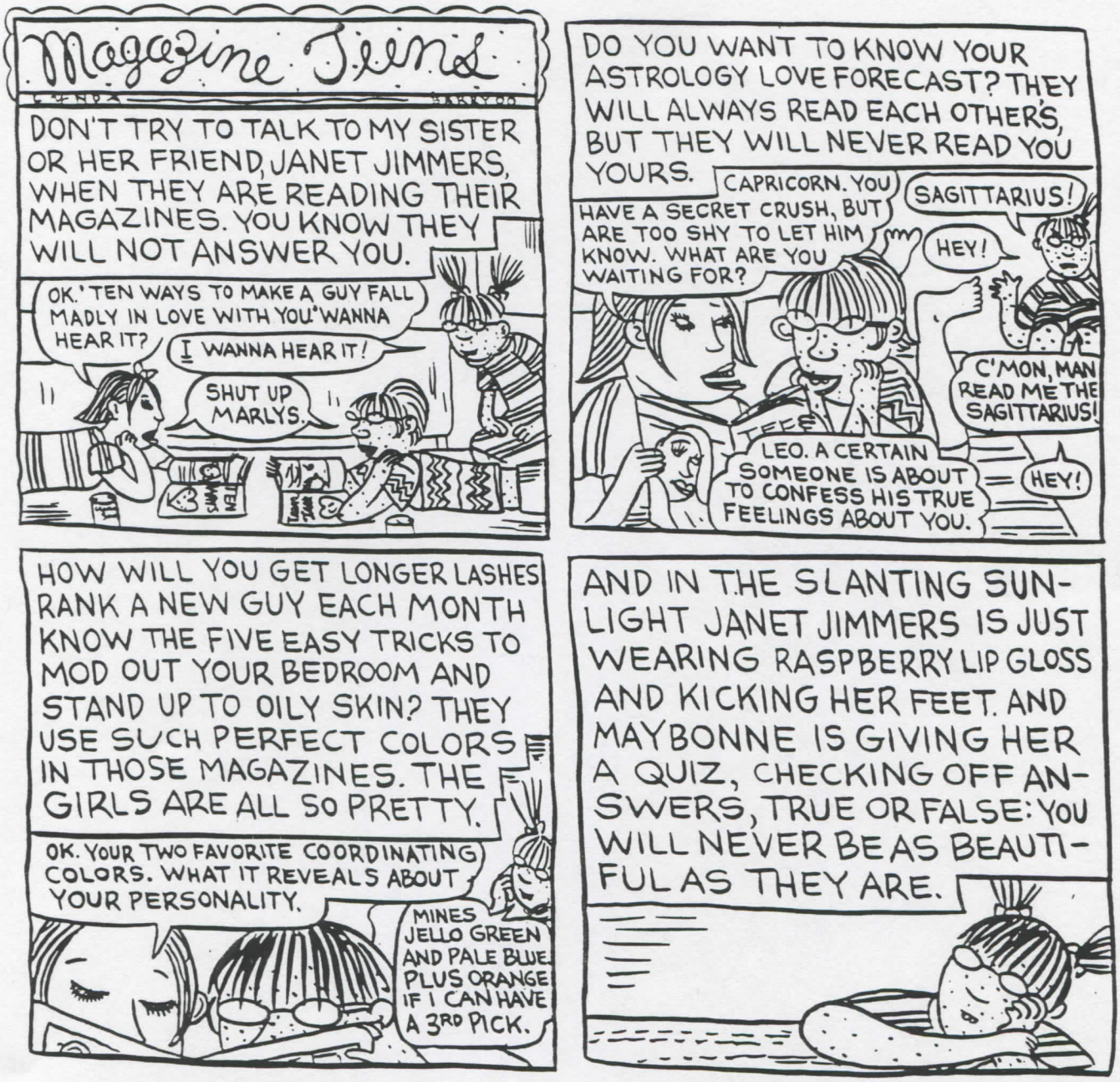
There are all sorts of censors that appear in our heads while we work. Some are easy to detect: the ones that tell us the work is bad before it even comes all the way into existence. But there are also the ones who want us to make the work pretty, sweet, or poetic. Parts of ourselves that urge us to fix things that aren't broken or not even whole enough to be fixed. They're the parts of ourselves that are like plastic surgery, that would have every person look the same. It's an effort to control what scares us. The censoring parts of our minds remind me a little of *Cosmopolitan* magazine. If those hints on how to be sexy, beautiful, man-attracting women really worked, that magazine would lose its readership. Who would read *Cosmo* if they had the life *Cosmo* promises?

Your mentions of Hansel and Gretel make me think about how one of the most chilling elements of that story is also a theme in your work: The children follow their father into the woods, and he abandons them. Here, as in a number of your stories, the obligation of a child to obey the parent is essentially called into question. For example, in *Cruddy*, Roberta's father demands absolute loyalty and absolute secrecy, two things that will lead her to certain destruction if she follows through with them. Could you comment on how your work tells the truth about aspects of family and childhood that people like to gloss over?

I think you just said it better than I ever could. It's funny how I don't think much about repeating themes in my work. I try not to look at my work from the outside in. I try to always be in the work when it's happening and away from it and in the world when I'm not doing it. I know there is value for many people in taking stories apart, but I never got much from it. Mainly it served to make me self-conscious, and self-consciousness is exactly what I'm trying to lose. I think that's what I mean by getting lost. Losing self-consciousness, losing the contemporary self, and emerging in a place that is convincing enough to give me the experiences I write about. This is when fiction becomes autobiographical. The events never happened in the shared world but in the private arena of creative work, they have to absolutely happen for the images to be transferable to the reader. Not that the reader should be in one's mind *ever* when working. But I think an artist has to have the experience she is writing about before she can give it to someone else. You can have the experience in imagination, but you *must* have it (like how we have experiences in dreams—are they fiction?). Otherwise it's like giving someone one of those cakes we see in bakery windows that are actually just decorated styrofoam.

Do you think that things are more difficult for adolescents now than back when we were kids? Or are there just different variations of the same kind of pressures?

I don't really know the answer to that. As an adult looking in I would say the gun thing is something I never had to deal with. But, funny enough, some of the fashions are nearly identical to what I wore. When my 13-year-old friend [who's staying with me this week] and I went shopping, I was surprised to see some of the exact styles of shirts and pants I wore. So much of



what's easy and what's hard for teens depends on their home life and their character. I think this has always been true. I don't know how different things really are. I'd only be guessing.

I don't have kids, but I am very lucky to have kids who like to come and stay with me for a few days now and then. I've known this one since she was 4. I'm really excited about what sorts of things are going on with her and the kind of experiences we'll have together this week. She's really cool. But kids tend to be.

It must be fun to have a young friend.

It *is* fun having a friend who is 13. One of the things I was reminded of is how different everyone is. A person may be 13, but they are who they are and that's stronger than the age they happen to be.

Did you know *Cosmo* now puts out *CosmoGirl*? My 13-year-old friend introduced me to it. It's not really any different from the other teen magazines out there. We bought all of them and read them intensely. I'd forgotten about how many ideas I got from magazines like that. And how much I loved the quizzes.

Earlier, you mentioned the censoring function of a magazine like *Cosmo*. In your work, it's the teenage Maybonne who has, to a certain extent, internalized

many of those censoring devices. She worries about her appearance and gazes in the mirror looking for her identity but measuring herself against outside standards (the pecking order of school, for instance, which is determined by a narrowly defined concept of beauty for girls). By contrast, Marlys completely appropriates the advice-column voice for her own ends. Her "makeovers" and beauty tips are expressions of her rampant creative spirit and are not submissive to any norm.

I think Maybonne is a teen, and Marlys is a kid. I don't think I'll ever see Marlys in her teenage years, but if I did I am sure she would have the same kind of difficulties Maybonne has. Self-consciousness is out there waiting, and it grabs on hard in adolescence.

You said that you used to get lots of ideas from magazines like *CosmoGirl*. Where are some of the places you get ideas these days?

Actually, the ideas I was talking about getting from those teen magazines were the ones I got from them when I was a teenager. I was sort of excited when my 13-year-old friend talked about *CosmoGirl* because I thought they would be full of ideas for me *now*, which is part of the reason I bought all of them when we went to the store (the other part being that it's the sort of godmotherish extravaganza I believe in), but I did scour them for ideas and didn't really find any. My ideas for my work don't really come from outside of me, although there are details that catch. Part of it has to be because I've never been good at working with a conscious intention. My only conscious intention that pays off is the conscious intention to clean off my suzuri stone and grind the sumi ink (it's a lot less impressive than it sounds) and breathe a certain way when I make the first strokes of the brush so that I can lose conscious intention and hear the thing one word at a time like it is being dictated to me.

I started using brushes and pens about 15 or so years ago when my hand started hurting from drawing and writing so much. I've switched back and forth ever since. I wish I'd discovered sumi ink a long time ago. I really like it a lot. I learned to do it by getting books out of the library (I love the library and go there all the time) and messed around and messed around and tried different brushes and inks and finally settled on the traditional way of grinding the ink stick to make fresh sumi ink every time I sit down to work. I don't make very much. Maybe a tablespoon at the most. And I do a little figure painting every morning before I start writing, or I do some very big longhand calligraphy. The reason I like the sumi brush and ink is that it's a bit of a challenge to work with but when you're in the groove with it, it's so wonderful. I work on a very basic drawing paper that comes in a pad. The strips take about two hours of actual drawing time (about half an hour a panel) but the slow waiting-for-the-story time adds another hour. Lately I've been getting up and doing things like hanging the laundry outside in between panels. I never used to do that. I always thought if I got up from the desk, the story would fade, but it doesn't if I leave for short amounts of time.

Do the suzuri stone and sumi ink come out of Japanese traditions?

"Sumi" means ink; "Sumi-e" means ink painting. I was curious after you asked, and I didn't know, so...I went to the library and read a little. It seems that Sumi-e appeared in Japan at the same time Zen did, about 1200 A.D. The people who introduced it to Japan were the monks and scholars who visited China, where ink painting and Buddhism were in full swing. Sumi-e is closely associated with Zen philosophy, and nearly any book you open on the subject will mention Zen. I've been spending my mornings for the last week learning more about Sumi-e. If I had my way, I would do nothing else for a while. It's all-consuming! It's endless in possibility.

I've only been doing it for about a year and I'm not really that good at it, although I love the meditative quality of it. I draw a couple of Marlys drawings every morning before I start. I'm working on a little side project called "One Hundred Views of Marlys," only I've done like 500 views of her. I paint her doing all kinds of things. Yesterday she was eating an orange Popsicle and doing yoga and climbing a tree and wearing a fancy headband (four separate paintings). It gets me warmed up.

Do you like having a strip on the Internet? ["100 Demons," Barry's biweekly 20-panel color strip, appears on *Salon*.]

I've never seen a whole strip online. I looked at the first one, but my computer was so slow (it's old) and I kept getting thrown offline, so I gave up. I don't like to look at my work when it's printed or posted or whatever you would call it when it's online. I don't like to look at it too much after it is done.

I'm always a little woozy when I finish a *Salon* strip. They take SO DANG LONG! and they require so much concentration. Painting with the sumi brush requires total body calmness (at least for me it does) because the paintbrush will show every little shake and unsteadiness. I read about regulating one's breath so that one is only drawing while breathing out, and that's supposed to steady the line, but after six hours I don't think anything will steady it. I just faxed the black and white to

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my editor, and when she sends back her edit (she's a dream editor, it's mostly spelling corrections), I'll get ready to paint it. I'll spend the whole weekend doing that, but it's the fun part. I can have the TV on the whole time. I've listened to a lot of old movies while I've worked on the *Salon* pieces. Sometimes I look up. Mostly I just listen.

Have you had occasion to visit any of the sites, shrines, or discussion groups devoted to you? Do you have any thoughts on this aspect of cyberculture?

I have never visited any of the websites that mention my work, except for Marlys Magazine [at www.marlysmagazine.com], which I looked at once and really loved. I contacted the fellow who does that site and asked him if he wanted to run the strip and he did so now I send him the strip. The last thing I would want is to read what people are saying about me or my work. I have a problem and a dread of being self-conscious, and looking into what people are saying about me would freak me out too badly even if it was all good. Plus I just don't groove on the Internet. Maybe it would make a difference if I had a better computer, but truthfully, I don't like looking at things on a computer screen, and I don't like reading things on a computer screen at all. When friends mention some cool thing they saw on the Internet, I think I should get a newer computer, but the truth is, I don't think I would use it that much. I've used the faster computers at the library once or twice to do some research, but even that was unsatisfying. It was faster than going through books, but I felt that same kind of exhausted I feel after too much TV or being at a mall. So the Internet thing may not be for me. The one aspect that does interest me is all the radio stations from around the world one can get. That seems really cool. But not cool enough for me to get a whole new computer for. I like my life little and simple. I work alone. I don't have any assistants. I like the summer because I can hang the clothes on the line, which is one of my favorite ways to take a break. (In fact, when I finish this I'm going outside to do just that.) It's great that people can see my work on the Internet, though. I'm really grateful.

My littlest dog, Lulu, is staring at me. When I look over at her she wags her tail. Rat terriers (like Jack Russells) usually have their tails cut off, but I asked that Lulu be able to keep hers. It's a hilarious tail, curled into a complete loop, and she has a lot of language with it. When I look at her now she vibrates it, a very quick little wag that is her hopeful wag. She'd like to go outside and lie in the sun. I'd like to hang laundry. It's going to get up to 90 degrees today. I'm loving it.

Do your dogs help you with your work?

Let me just say here that dogs are the best most beautiful creatures. And my husband is also a best and most beautiful creature. And while I'm writing this he is washing the big dog, Ooo-la, in the bathtub. Here's to a fine mate and fine dog.

My dogs are with me all day. I walk them and because of that I actually leave the house. I leave my desk when I have to let them out. I nap better in the afternoons (I'm a firm believer in naps) because they all come into the bed with me. They smell good, and it calms me to smell them when I am worked up. I can't imagine life without them. Sometimes I do comic strips starring Ed Martin, who calls himself Fred Milton in the strip. It's easy to do his voice. I do their voices all day, have long conversations with them. So does my husband. I hear him downstairs going on and on with them. He's doing it right now. He's bathing Lulu now, drying her off, and he's saying in her voice (kind of high-pitched), "I feel fresh! Fresh! I feel so fresh!" Ed Martin just ran in. He's wet. Also feeling "fresh." He just threw up on the floor and ran out with his tail wagging. Dogs. God bless them.

Lynda Barry can sing without moving her lips, which is something you can witness for yourself when she reads in your town. Snag a copy of The! Greatest! of! Marlys! *(Sasquatch Books) for yourself at your local independent bookstore.*

Audrey Bilger divides her time between 18th-century England and the deep dark wilderness of Los Angeles. She relies upon humor as a survival tactic and upon Cheryl Pawelski as fax courier and supplier of a steady stream of tunes.