

# The Best Book Catalog in the World

Bob Black

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Remember *The Whole Earth Catalog*? Self-sufficiency, personal growth, utopian visions, innovative technology? That was then and now, it's today. Not all that different in many of its listings but very different in point of view is the 1994 Main Catalog of Loompanics Unlimited, the dark side of the Power. It is the *Whole Earth Catalog* ruthlessly re-edited by Friedrich Nietzsche.

Somewhere in this catalog there must be a cookbook with a recipe for Hobbit *Tartare*. This is either the worst or, as it modestly proposes, "The Best Book Catalog in the World." It is by and for people who want freedom, unabashedly understood as a question of power. (The distinction was always an elusive one.) Loompanics is visionary, almost mystical in its own way, but not *tunnel*-visionary. The Catalog pushes pragmatism past the point of fantasy to a place where its archetypal user, the soul of Rimbaud in the body of Rambo, struts unobtrusively — a Road Warrior with outside interests.

On paper at least, Loompanics and its customers are not too particular about what it takes to get what they want. Many of the books available in this 254 page catalog (and in precious few other places) tell how to do the sort of things best left undone in a better world, and even in this one. Consider John Minnery's 512-page "*Kill Without Joy: The Complete How to Kill Book* ; or *Secrets of Methamphetamine Manufacture* by "Uncle Fester"; or the lockpicking manuals of "Eddie the Wire," one of which was Loompanics' all-time bestseller until recently edged by the catalog itself. There are books on home-made guns and ammo — and home-made money (in the vulgate, *counterfeiting*). Often it is point/counterpoint: assassination manuals but also *Dead Clients Don't Pay* (bodyguarding); lock-picking manuals but also home and business security manuals. On which side of the divide to place the for-

merly available *How to Rip Off a Drug Dealer* — by “Rex Feral” — is not my call, happily.

So many Loompanics authors (the discerning reader will have surmised) employ pseudonyms — or, to put it another way, have something to hide — that I propose hereafter to dispense with quotation marks when I mention authors like Adam Cash (*Guerrilla Capitalism* and *How to Do Business “Off the Books”*), Tony Newborn (*Secrets of International Identity Change*) and Judge X who, if he really is a judge as he says, has good cause to postpone past retirement taking credit for *How to Avoid a Drunk Driving Conviction*.

Pretty scary stuff, eh? Not to worry — too much, anyway. Loompanics mail-order mayhem hasn’t launched the 50,000 recipients of its catalog — up 100% in three years — on any apparent crime wave. Or maybe it’s point/counterpoint so let’s call it a wash. Then again, the mischief-minded might have bought *Ninja: The Invisible Assassins* so how are we to know? Admittedly this book no longer appears, as it did in past years, in the catalog (or is it still there but nobody can see it?)

Avowedly egoist and amoralist, Loompanics has a reputation as more reliable than many mail-order outfits, much the way atheists usually lead more ethical lives than Christians. Self-interest is the reason. “So controversial are the books we offer,” writes founder-owner Michael Hoy, “that most magazines will not allow us to advertise. Bookstores and distributors will not carry our publications. Periodicals refuse to review our books.” (Well, not always.) Even *Soldier of Fortune* bans most Loompanics advertising. The cheap and cheesy covers common on early Loompanics publication recall the days when nearly all its books were bought, sight unseen, by mail. Loompanics now carries over 800 titles, including 160 of its own publications, justifying *Newsweek*’s description of it as “the biggest of the not-ready-for-mass-market publishing outfits.” Because the marketing strategy is many titles mostly in smallish quantities, prices tend to be high. To compensate, Loompanics cultivates its customers (shipments within 24 hours) in order to keep them.

Who then *are* Loompanics customers? (You can rent the mailing list to find out, but any of them to worry about are surely among those who checked the box to opt out.) They are probably *not* the well-armed, high-tech, drug-taking, survivalist, martial-arts, black-marketeering, tax-dodging, life-extensionist, freethinking, paper-tripping Discordian master criminals that a composite of catalog cullings would suggest. I think they are mostly spiritually restless materialists: macho contemplatives locked into day jobs. They dream of escape — of “vonu” (invulnerability to coercion by withdrawal from society); of the High Frontier (space colonization); of life extension to tide them over till a better day. They long for *the big score*. They take hope from books which parade their contempt for normal life as they portray fantastic possibilities always presented according to a patented formula of tough-

minded realism. The typical Loompanics reader is, I conjecture, a surrealist trapped in the body of an engineer.

So I doubt the crime rate is much affected by the self-help burglary books or the crime prevention texts. (Maybe a *little* by the tax-“avoidance” and harassment manuals.) Loompanics is neither pro- nor anti-crime, neither right nor left. Loompanics lore is not so much neutral as double-edged. The company does not, strictly speaking, believe in “rights” (it published *The Myth of Natural Rights*), but even if rights are myths or metaphors, its own favorite could only be the Promethean right for *you* to know anything that *They* know.

As befits the self-styled “lunatic fringe of the libertarian movement,” Loompanics insists that since governments know all about violence and dirty tricks, individuals too had better learn the score. Is such rhetoric too facile to excuse a torture manual? Maybe, but isn’t it a pensive point that many Loompanics manuals on the Dark Arts are simply reprints of government publications like *Covert Surveillance and Electronic Penetration* and *CIA Field Expedient Incendiary Manual* (“An excellent manual for fire departments and law enforcement,” says the catalog)? Other titles raise real credentials challenges. Is it absurd to consider *How to Start Your Own Country*? It’s been done before: we’re living in one. *Basement Nukes*, a classic of Loompanics deadpan dadaism, ostentatiously eschews all emotion and all ethics, yet this futurist fantasy forces reflection about just who is qualified to possess nuclear weapons if you and I aren’t.

Libertarianism is no longer the Loompanics reference point it once was. *The Case Against a Libertarian Political Party* wasn’t reprinted, according to Loompanics editor Steve O’Keefe, probably because there are not many libertarians left who need convincing. Loompanics departs from the uptight anality typical of libertarians who would rather not know *How to Collect Illegal Debts* (the author is in the pen) and who’d never even consider *Fighting Back on the Job*. The libertarian glossy *Reason* banned all Loompanics advertising because it adjudged *one* ad for *The Right to Be Greedy* “misleading” (translation: disconcerting to libertarians), which seems to bespeak a certain lack of faith in the self-corrective harmony of the free market.

While self-empowerment is the primal product — 54 titles begin with the words *How to* — Loompanics is doing increasingly good service as an original and reprint publisher of pure ideas. The line includes a photoreprint of Eunice Minette Schuster, *Native American Anarchism* (1932) and an essay collection by Bolton Hall, a Henry Georgist who anticipated several New Age and Green themes. Loompanics reset and reprinted Ragnar Redbeard’s Social Darwinist diatribe *Might Is Right* (1896) and *The Autobiography of a Criminal* (1807) by Henry Tufts, the earliest American career criminal to have published his autobiography.

More often the heretics who scale the soapbox are contemporary. There's the World Power Foundation calling for a new, colorblind slave society to meet the needs of the many to submit and, more important, the few to dominate. Two of its postulates: "Excitement is more important than equality" and "Might and right are not exactly the same, but after a few years no one will notice the difference." Or *Principia Discordia*, a speedball concocted of Zen, conspiracy theory and Americana whose *mythos* inspired *Illuminatus!* by Robert Shea and Robert Anton Wilson. One of its authors, Kerry Wendell Thornley, testified before the Warren Commission about a Marine Corps buddy he wrote a novel about: Lee Harvey Oswald.

Rip-off manuals — bread-and-butter stuff for Loompanics — are the perfect product from the vendor's viewpoint. No need for planned obsolescence: the better they sell, the sooner they evoke counter-measures which compel their frequent revision or replacement. Thus *The Paper Trip I* begat *The Paper Trip II* and some spinoffs, all explaining how to document a new identity. Act now before Congress finally mandates a national ID! *New ID in America* is one of the best (more realistic, less boosteristic). The tax loophole books wear out even faster. *How to Find Missing Persons*, an eye-opening introduction to the methods of private investigators, has an aura of authenticity, although it grossly overestimates the number of states where arrest records are open to the public.

If a lot of these books promise more than they deliver, that may be their most important message: to accept no authority at face value, not even their own. Take two of the more notorious recent releases. *How to Sell Yourself to Science* disabused me of what little interest that held for me, although if I didn't have scarred kidneys, I could see selling one in some circumstances. Whereas *The Art and Science of Dumpster Diving* is not only practical, it's hilarious: the author grew up in a family of super-scroungers who lived like lords. It is not exaggerating too much to praise this book as both a critique of our world of waste and an aspect of what we can — what we'll have to — do about it.

For Loompanics, victimization is voluntary insofar as it is avoidable. You can survive and even prosper during the bad times while awaiting utopian salvation (whether or not it ever comes to pass). "Be here now" — or make my day! The title of a crime-prevention volume by an ex-con says it all, almost: *Don't Become the Victim*.

How does it all cash out? Surely not in martial-arts marauding. With schoolchildren running amok with assault rifles it's silly to fret about Loompanics selling instructions for homemade zip guns. A goodly share of homicides are committed by the police. Having read the originals, they have no need for the Loompanics reprints. Like pornography, Loompanics looks like an incitement to sin but it's really a substitute for it. Its important self-defense books are the ones, not about throwing knives or razor-fighting, but about how to stay out of kill-or-be-killed

situations in the first place. To these, no one should object, and I know of no other source for so many of them.

If Loompanics readers are attuned to its wavelength as I receive it, they pursue liberty through privacy, more by avoidance than approach. That is what relates a book on how to hide stuff to a book on how to live year-round in an RV.

*Vonu: The Search for Personal Freedom* may express the core Loompanics aspiration. During the 1960's the author, "Rayo," espoused the rational transformation of one's lifestyle to gain liberty through self-sufficiency. Since authority is too strong to resist, the Vonuan becomes invisible to it by removing to the wilderness, alone or with his mate. Finally Rayo, who was rigorously logical, acted on his own logic. In 1974 he vanished. As his editor says, "his goal was always to become invisible to coercers (meaning mainly Government). He might have come to believe that this required that he become invisible to everyone." If this is logic it is also insanity. But if this is madness it is also the stuff of romance. Who would have thought so mundane an American tradition as do-it-yourself has such tragic and transcendent power? Everyman his own ninja! If everybody minded his own business, it would revolutionize the world. That's the general idea. For the details, consult the Loompanics Catalog.

Of course something might go wrong. If it does, Loompanics has a back-up book: *Surviving in Prison*.

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My oft-revised Loompanics Catalog review, first published in the *LA Reader*  
[1985], updated in *The Abolition of Work and Other Essays* [1986], and extensively  
updated for *Beneath the Underground* [1994].

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