



# Compass Rose

## Literature and Art Journal

### Interview with Arnie Kantrowitz

#### Compass Rose:

*As you were developing as a writer, were there any artists you tried to emulate? How did that affect your work?*

#### Arnie Kantrowitz

In my late teens and early twenties, I wrote poetry exclusively. As I read poets, I was affected by their language and their thoughts. Specifically, I remember Dylan Thomas and T.S. Eliot, as different as they were. It was a time of experimentation for me, trial and error, and unfortunately some of the "errors" got published along with the successes. Live and learn.

#### CR:

*How do you approach a new piece?*

#### Kantrowitz:

Whether it's a poem (rare, now) an essay, or a book, I let it "cook" on the back burner for a while— days, weeks, whatever's possible. I keep a pad handy, and whenever I think of an idea, a memory or a key phrase, I jot it down. Then I use the notes to stimulate and arrange my writing.

#### CR:

*Explain how you deal with criticism.*

#### Kantrowitz:

First I go apeshit (unless it's positive, in which case I go apeshit in the other direction). If it's good, I read it several times. If it's not so good, I consider it, take the advice if it's warranted and put it away.

#### CR:

*You wrote and published a memoir before the form took off in popularity. How do you feel about the memoir genre now, and, looking back, would you change anything about the way you approached the piece.*

#### Kantrowitz:

I think the memoir genre, along with "reality" shows on TV, suggest a rise in the public's interest in fact (whatever that is). But since fiction tells a truth as well, it still has a place. Memoirs will be useful to the future because they not only record a life (or what the author thinks his or her life is about), but they also chronicle a time and place. That was my

effort in *Under the Rainbow*. I actually had a chance to revise it when it was reissued 20 years later, but aside from minor changes of names, etc. all I did was add a chapter on what had happened since the first edition.

**CR:**

*What reactions do you aim to extract from your readers?*

**Kantrowitz:**

I want to use language to make people think and feel about the themes I am writing about, mostly the legitimacy and significance of gay feelings and relationships. I want people not to trivialize experiences they haven't understood before.

**CR:**

*Describe your writing process.*

**Kantrowitz:**

See answer #2. Then, as Dorothy Parker said, I sit at the keyboard "until small drops of blood appear on my forehead." When the first draft finally comes gushing forth, I write as fast as I can. If it's long, I revise the previous day's work, in order to get myself back in the piece, before I continue. I meddle and fuss for a while when it's done; then I put it away for as long as is feasible. Then I do a major revision, often moving things around and eliminating and enhancing. Then I polish it a couple of times. Finally, I read it to death because at that moment it seems like the greatest thing ever written.

**CR:**

*Obviously, Walt Whitman has had quite a lasting effect on both your life and your writing. What drew you to his work?*

**Kantrowitz:**

I didn't think much about Whitman until I took a course in him in graduate school. My professor was a traditional scholar, who dealt with the arrangement of Whitman's rough drafts. As I read, I found a wonderful kinship with Whitman's worldview, his discussion of sexuality, spirituality and democratic brotherhood all made sense to me. He spoke directly of what it is to be a human being in the universe. I guess I fell in love. My professor didn't get it. He gave me a B. Now I've taught my own course and written my own book on Whitman.

**CR:**

*What are the advantages and disadvantages of teaching the craft at the college level?*

**Kantrowitz:**

The advantage is the contact with young minds, which may be inexperienced as writers, but which keep one involved with the present world and the enthusiasm and energy of the young. Another advantage is being steeped in writing and language use all the time. The disadvantage, of course, is that you're dealing with other people's writing, not your own. But there are always summers—or early mornings, if you're stoked.

**CR:**

*After having such an active role in Stonewall and GLAAD, do you feel if you had a lasting effect on the gay community? Do you feel as if you've left a legacy? (If possible, could you go into specific detail about Stonewall? I don't think many people in New Hampshire know about it.)*

**Kantrowitz:**

The Stonewall riots took place in June 1969, after the police had raided a gay bar called the Stonewall Inn. After several days of riots, the Gay Liberation Front was formed. I saw the riots from across the street on the way home from a date with a woman. Unfamiliar with the gay scene at that time, I didn't know what I was seeing until I read about it in the newspaper. Six months later the Gay Activists Alliance (a more moderate, non violent organization) was formed, and that's when I joined the movement. A few months later, I became secretary and then vice-president of GAA. Through street demonstrations and writing, I feel that I did my share in the gay struggle. I can hardly take credit for the work of hundreds and later thousands of people. Fifteen years later, I was one of the original seven founders of The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, organized to educate and confront the media's misrepresentation of gays and AIDS. We worked for free. Now the organization is a national one, whose president makes more than twice what I do. That's a legacy, as are the changes in laws and public attitude, which I played a small role in changing. But my real legacy is my writing. That's all mine.

**CR:**

*What's the strangest thing you've done to support your writing?*

**Kantrowitz:**

I wish I could say I shipped out on a tramp steamer or slaved away in a carwash, but the strangest thing I did was to teach talented young whippersnappers like you!