



Palahniuk, Chuck (b. 1962)

by Craig Kaczorowski

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Chuck Palahniuk in 2004.
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Chuck Palahniuk is known for a series of popular and provocative novels, such as *Fight Club*, *Survivor*, *Choke*, and *Lullaby*, characterized by outlandish plot developments, unsparing anatomical detail, ribald humor, and graphic violence, told in a blunt, but spirited, prose style.

Palahniuk's books, as Sean O'Hagan notes in the *Observer*, "tend to be extreme, both in their subject matter and in their telling." Similarly, the *Library Journal* declares, "Palahniuk has become a master of depicting the dark and depraved underbelly of our society through the voices of mordantly existential protagonists."

Meanwhile, Stephen Holden of the *New York Times* argues that "Opinion is still divided as to whether his oeuvre amounts to a tenacious attempt at reinventing the Gothic tradition for the 21st century, or a sustained, career-long attempt to put you off your lunch."

In an interview, Palahniuk himself says that "Every time I write something, I think, this is the most offensive thing I will ever write. But no. I always surprise myself."

He has also, however, called his fiction "contemporary romances," and asserts that his goal is not necessarily to shock or upset his readers. As Palahniuk explains, "I'm always trying to reach a transcendent point, a romantic point, but reach it in a really unconventional way, a really profane way. To get to that romantic, touching, heartbreaking place, but through a lot of acts of profanity."

Since the 1996 publication of his debut novel, *Fight Club*, which was later adapted into a critically contentious cult film by David Fincher, Palahniuk has earned a fanatically loyal readership.

Palahniuk believes that his popularity is based, in part, on the fact that he tends to write novels "for the kind of people who don't normally read novels."

"I try to tell a story," he explains, "the way someone would tell you a story in a bar, with the same kind of timing and pacing. . . . That sense of immediacy is more real to me than a lot of writerly, literary-type crafted stories."

His public readings, which frequently draw capacity crowds, have become notorious in the publishing world. His audiences, comprised mainly of young men, often come dressed as one of his characters, especially Tyler Durden, memorably portrayed by Brad Pitt in the film version of *Fight Club*.

During readings, Palahniuk regularly tosses story-related objects into the crowds, such as artificial limbs, blow-up sex dolls, or plastic vomit. He also often delights in reading from his more visceral and physically explicit stories; audience members have been reported to faint at such events.

Although Palahniuk is a gay man who has been out "for a million years," as he explained in a 2009 *Advocate*

interview, he has nonetheless frequently courted controversy in the media over his sexuality.

Early in his writing career, several newspaper articles stated that Palahniuk had a "wife," although he had in fact been in a long-term relationship with a male partner. Palahniuk took no action to correct the inaccurate claims.

He later explained that his marital status was simply "assumed" by the reporters themselves and that such an assumption was not worth clarifying. It was "just one those battles you choose to fight or not fight," Palahniuk asserted. "I saw it in print and thought, Oh well, what the hell." He also ventured that in some interviews he might have used the word *spouse*. As Palahniuk explained, "When I say 'spouse,' people make an assumption."

He continued to be guarded about his homosexuality until September 2003 when he intentionally outed himself in response to what he feared would be a public outing by a journalist.

Anxious that an upcoming article in *Entertainment Weekly*, written by Karen Valby, would reveal publicly for the first time that he was gay, Palahniuk posted an audio blog on a popular fan-created Internet site described as "the official Chuck Palahniuk website," and known as "The Cult."

In his blog, Palahniuk revealed the true gender of his spouse, and additionally made several derogatory statements about the interviewer and a member of her family, information that Valby herself had disclosed during the course of their interview. As Palahniuk noted in his remarks, "The knife cuts both ways."

However, when the five-page feature article appeared no mention was made regarding Palahniuk's sexuality. Instead, Valby stated that "Palahniuk has no wife and declines to discuss his personal life on the record, preferring to keep his fans guessing (which they're not shy about doing)."

Palahniuk's audio blog was subsequently deleted from the fan website, presumably to remove the derogatory statements about Valby and her family.

Disclosures about his homosexuality do not appear to have adversely affected Palahniuk's popularity, however. In fact, many of his fans continue to be surprised to learn that the writer is gay. As Palahniuk explained to Austin Bunn in the *Advocate*, he believes that such indifference to his sexuality, at least among his readers, demonstrates that being gay "is a more accepted part of people's lives now."

Nonetheless, Palahniuk persists in shunning the label of "gay author." In the same *Advocate* interview, Palahniuk explains, "I know people who have spun their nationality or their sexuality or their race, but after a few books it's really limiting and their readership doesn't want them to write about anything other than that experience. They find themselves pigeonholed, documenting the same small aspect of themselves over and over."

In *Invisible Monsters*, his first written novel, although published subsequent to the success of *Fight Club*, Palahniuk has one of his main characters, Brandy Alexander, a pre-op transsexual, recoil against such pigeonholing, declaring "I am not straight, and I am not gay. I'm not bisexual. I want out of the labels. I don't want my whole life crammed into a single word."

It is perhaps not surprising then, that Palahniuk's works are often about marginalized people striving to satisfy the fundamental need to connect with others and find acceptance within a community. As Palahniuk notes in the introduction to his 2004 collection of nonfiction writing, *Stranger than Fiction: True Stories*, "all my books are about a lonely person looking for some way to connect with other people."

Similarly, Antonio Casado de Rocha, in his essay "Disease and Community in Chuck Palahniuk's Early Fiction," observes that "the characters in Palahniuk's fiction usually have an unorthodox approach to life, but their

main goal is quite straightforward—to find a way to live together with other people."

Biography and Early Career

One of six children, Charles Michael "Chuck" Palahniuk was born to Fred, a railroad brakeman, and Carol Palahniuk, an office manager at a nuclear power plant, on February 21, 1962 in Pasco, Washington. While still a child, his family moved to a trailer home in nearby Burbank, Washington.

His parents fought often, and sometimes violently, and separated when Palahniuk was a boy; they eventually divorced when he was 14 years old. Consequently, Palahniuk and his siblings grew up mainly with their maternal grandparents on a cattle ranch in eastern Washington.

His paternal grandparents' lives had been particularly fraught with violence. One day, his paternal grandfather shot and killed his wife, reputedly during an argument about how much she had paid for a sewing machine; next, he went looking for his then 4-year-old son, with the intent to kill him as well.

"My father's first memories are of hiding under a bed, hearing his father call and seeing his heavy boots walk past, the smoking barrel of the gun hanging near the floor," Palahniuk reveals in "Consolation Prizes," one of the essays collected in *Stranger Than Fiction*. Unable to find his son, Palahniuk's grandfather turned the gun on himself and committed suicide.

Palahniuk himself did not learn the truth about his paternal grandparents' deaths until he was 18 years old; prior to then, he believed they had both died of rubella.

Palahniuk's own father also met a brutal death. In May 1999, his father, long divorced from his mother, was shot and his body burned by the ex-husband of a woman he had just begun dating. The man was subsequently found guilty of first-degree murder and executed; Palahniuk was closely involved in the court's decision to give his father's killer the death penalty.

In the wake of these events, Palahniuk began work on his fifth novel *Lullaby* (2002), in which one of his main characters explores the moral implications of committing murder. It is a novel that "contemplates rampant evil," according to Tom Shone, but one which is also "about the power to do good."

Palahniuk attended the University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication. After graduating in 1986, he took a series of jobs including movie projectionist, bicycle messenger, and dish washer, before embarking on a journalism career at the National Public Radio station in Eugene, Oregon.

He later moved to Portland, Oregon to work as a newspaper reporter for the *Oregonian*. He also volunteered at a homeless shelter and at an AIDS hospice.

Palahniuk ultimately found employment at Portland-based Freightliner Trucks, where he stayed for thirteen years, first as a diesel mechanic and later as a writer of mechanical repair manuals.

During this time, Palahniuk also began attending weekly writing seminars conducted by gay author Tom Spanbauer, whom Palahniuk acknowledges as his mentor. Spanbauer, who studied creative writing with Gordon Lish at Columbia University, is the creator of a concept known as "Dangerous Writing."

Palahniuk has described the concept as a minimalist approach to writing that encourages authors to explore taboo topics that might personally embarrass or intimidate them in order to express their anxieties and fears more openly and honestly. Palahniuk discusses Spanbauer's philosophy and teaching methods in the essay "Not Chasing Amy" in *Stranger Than Fiction*.

Palahniuk's first written novel, *Invisible Monsters*, about the fluidity of sexual identity, centers on the

relationship between Shannon McFarland, a once famous fashion model who has been horribly disfigured in a drive-by shooting, and Brandy Alexander, a pill-popping, pre-op transsexual who has based her gender modifications on what Shannon used to look like.

Palahniuk says that fashion magazines, which he used to read at his local laundromat, inspired the writing style he employed for the novel. "I love the language of fashion magazines," he explains in a *Village Voice* interview. "Eighteen adjectives and you find the word sweater at the end. . . . I thought, Wouldn't it be fun to write a novel in this fashion magazine language, so packed with hyperbole?"

Publishers roundly rejected the novel (although it eventually would be published in 1999 after the success of his next novel). Undaunted, Palahniuk set out to write an even more outrageous book, one that was "even darker and riskier and more offensive, all the things [publishers] didn't want."

That novel became *Fight Club*. "I thought, Well, they wouldn't buy it, but at least they wouldn't forget it," Palahniuk says. "And it turns out, boom—they loved it."

Fight Club

Told in the first person by an unnamed narrator, *Fight Club* is about a bored, and insomniac, office worker who first finds solace in attending a series of support-group meetings for illnesses he does not have before becoming involved with the mysterious, and charismatic Tyler Durden and organizing an underground society—bloody, brutal, bare-knuckle fight clubs—to help men express deep-rooted, primal aggression.

In an interview, Palahniuk explains that the novel began with "the idea that I wish there had been a structured, consensual way of exploring my ability to experience assault and to assault another person. That I could have trusted somebody enough to say, 'I've never been hit really hard and don't want to die not knowing what that's like, so would you hit me and I'll hit you?'"

Upon its publication in 1996, *Booklist* called *Fight Club* a "powerful, and possibly brilliant, first novel," while *Publishers Weekly* found it "caustic, outrageous, bleakly funny, violent and always unsettling . . . [an] utterly original creation [that] will make even the most jaded reader sit up and take notice."

The novel won the 1997 Oregon Book Award for Best Novel and the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association Award.

A visually stylish and obsessively scrutinized film version of *Fight Club* was released in 1999, directed by David Fincher, with a screenplay written by Jim Uhls. Brad Pitt played the iconic role of Tyler Durden, with Edward Norton as the unnamed narrator, and Helena Bonham Carter as Marla Singer, the love interest shared by the two men.

Similar to Palahniuk's novel, Fincher's film received polarizing critical response upon its initial release, but has since gained a passionate cult following.

Even before Palahniuk came out publicly as a gay man, several film critics perceived homoerotic undertones in the interactions between the two male characters. For example, David Denby, in his review of the film for *The New Yorker*, called it a "grunge rhapsody on fascist, sadomasochistic, and homoerotic themes," while Robert Alan Brook and Robert Westerfelhaus, writing in *Critical Studies in Media Communications*, titled their essay "Hiding Homoeroticism in Plain View: The *Fight Club* DVD as Digital Closet."

Other Works by Palahniuk

Palahniuk followed up the success of *Fight Club* with the novel *Survivor* (1999), which concerns Tender Branson, the last remaining member of a mass-suicide cult, who dictates his life story into the black box recorder of an airplane he has hijacked.

His fourth novel *Choke* (2001) focuses on Victor Mancini, a theme park attendant and recovering sex addict (Palahniuk fills the novel with graphic, highly detailed, and increasingly bizarre sex scenes that the author says he gathered by interviewing members of his local gym), who, as a means to make extra income to help pay his mother's expensive medical bills, pretends to choke in restaurants in order to scam money through emotional blackmail from anyone who attempts to save him.

A film version of *Choke* was released in 2008, written and directed by Clark Gregg, and starring Sam Rockwell as Victor Mancini. Stephen Holden, writing for the *New York Times*, observes that the film "revolves around two of Mr. Palahniuk's favorite intertwined themes: a lost young man's search for a father figure, and the atavistic male need, stymied by modern civilization, to vent antisocial aggression and to conquer simply for the visceral thrill of it."

Palahniuk is a very prolific writer, publishing a new book nearly once a year. His other novels include *Lullaby* (2002), *Diary* (2003), *Haunted: A Novel of Stories* (2005), *Rant: An Oral History of Buster Casey* (2007), *Snuff* (2008), *Pygmy* (2009), *Tell-All* (2010), and *Damned* (2011).

He has also published two books of nonfiction, *Fugitives and Refugees: A Walk in Portland, Oregon* (2003) and *Stranger Than Fiction: True Stories* (2004).

Palahniuk currently lives with his long-term partner outside Vancouver, Washington.

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