

INTRODUCTION

**Chuck Palahniuk,
Existentialist
Paramedic**

Read Mercer Schuchardt

Let us say at the outset that, if all great literature is more complex than the naïve reader can suspect, it is equally true that this complexity, once discovered, can be rendered in simple terms.

—Frederick C. Crews, *The Pooh Perplex*

In an early interview with Chuck Palahniuk in *The Onion*,* the following exchange occurs:

O: A lot of *Fight Club*'s fans seem to appreciate the movie on a lower level than Kierkegaard might. How do you deal with fans who just see it as a call to anarchy or violence?

CP: Wow. Bummer. I can't control that, you know? All I can control is how much fun it is for me to do it. And beyond

*www.theonionavclub.com/avclub3842/avfeature_3842.html

that, I can't control whether people are going to go to it, whether they're going to like it, how they're going to interpret it. I can't control it, so I don't even worry about it.

O: Is there a wrong way to read your work?

CP: No. I accept the whole Roland Barthes idea of the death of the author. People are going to bring their own body of knowledge, their own experience, to whatever. It is possibly going to be, for them, something in contradiction to what it was for you. I can't control that, so I won't even worry about it.

The collection you are reading is about that last paragraph. About readers “bringing their own body of experience, knowledge, and whatever” to interpreting the cult novel and subsequent cult film that is still, a decade after the movie and book, the verifiable cult phenomenon known as *Fight Club*. How verifiable? Well, name another author whose Web site (www.chuckpalahniuk.net) is called “The Cult” and whose content gets updated on a weekly, sometimes daily basis. Oh, and is run entirely by fans, not by the author himself. Or name a living author whose work is still “new” and yet has already achieved the status of “modern classic” in literary terms, to the degree that it has inspired two full academic conferences, has occupied the full issue of a refereed scholarly journal (*Stirrings Still: The International Journal of Existential Literature*), a documentary movie, thousands of groupies, and dozens upon dozens of references in all other areas of popular culture. In truth, whether considering his novels, his movies, or Chuck Palahniuk himself, the effect of cult-like devotion is discernible, and that effect begins with *Fight Club*. *Fight Club* didn't just inspire a movie, it inspired a video game and a myriad of imitations in manifest cultural forms. From highbrow to lowbrow to nobrow, *Fight Club* is still on the tip of everyone's tongue. In January 2008 *Fight Club* was the subject of a chapter of Jonah Goldberg's book *Liberal Fascism*. In May 2006 CNN released a story* on a real-life fight club in Menlo Park, California, in which it

*www.cnn.com/2006/US/05/29/fight.club.ap/index.html

was reported that “computer techs turn to fisticuffs for fun.” Read Palahniuk’s own introduction to the tenth anniversary edition of *Fight Club* for an even more extensive list of influences the book has had in the decade since its release. Do an eBay search for “Fight Club” and you’ll find more than four hundred items for sale, from signed first editions of the book to the leather jackets and shades worn by Brad Pitt in the movie. With Palahniuk’s new novel and the film adaptation of *Choke* both coming out this year, it’s safe to say that the Chuck Palahniuk effect is still going as strong as when it first entered into the world as a book in 1996 and as a film in 1999. So while reading what follows, always remember that it “is possibly going to be, for them, something in contradiction to what it was for you.”

Put another way, this collection is an attempt to answer the question: Just what is *Fight Club* really about? Is *Fight Club* about “a generation that’s had its value system largely informed by advertising culture”?* Is it a story of male anxiety in a metrosexual world? Of ritual religion in a secular age? Of the genealogy of the doppelgänger figure in world literature? Of the spiritual malaise induced by the technological society? Of the avenues of escape from totalitarian capitalism? Or could it just be a grown-up retelling of the comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes*? Could it be an exposé of Janus mind control programming by government spooks? Is it really a modern version of *The Great Gatsby*, with Jack and Tyler vying for Marla’s affections instead of Jay and Tom vying for Daisy—or was it Marla and Jack fighting for Tyler’s affections? Is it a veiled autobiographical confession of contracting AIDS? Is it a retelling of Pink Floyd’s *The Wall*? Of *American Beauty*? Of *The Matrix*? Is the movie a filmed adaptation of *The Unabomber Manifesto*? And what does it have to do with J.R.R. Tolkien, or the myth of Oedipus, or Nietzschean existentialism? No, really: Is it possible that one novel can really be about so many disparate, even contradictory things? Yes, and here’s why: As the foremost American novelist with his diagnostic digit on the pulse of contemporary culture, Chuck Palahniuk is a documenter of our

*As Edward Norton, discussing his role in the film *Fight Club* at Yale University on October 3rd, 1999, suggested.

world of disparate contradictions. He is our existentialist paramedic: He won't save you, and he won't even give you any medicine, but he'll hold your hand all the way to the hospital. On the way there he'll show you a mirror, let you see just how badly beat up you really are, and in some strange way you will arrive at the ER feeling more hopeful, less lonely, less despairing. He's not religious—not directly—and yet his characters and their stories present the reader with an occasion for something unusual. If confession is good for the soul, whether or not you think you have one, then reading Chuck Palahniuk allows you to admit being you to yourself just a little bit more. And this uncanny knack he has for nailing the zeitgeist, no matter how painful or bizarre it is, is the reason he has any readers, let alone makes bestseller lists. In a world in which no one reads anymore, this is no small feat. Reading Palahniuk is like watching MTV and being reminded of something very important at the same time. *Huh? Go away! Wait, what was that?* You can't fight the sensation that his books give you: that you're rushing right through the really important parts. As he says in *Invisible Monsters*, the novel that technically preceded *Fight Club*: "Well, get used to that feeling. That's how your whole life will feel someday."

No matter who you are, you're going to have to either reach high or stoop low to enjoy the full spectrum contained in this collection. Some authors have Ph.D.s, use very big words (my favorite: *eucatastrophe*) and drop citations like birdseed in their full, scholarly, and academic approaches. Other pieces are more metaphorical, literary, or just display the beautiful and unique snowflake of their interpretation. Some pieces are incredibly short (the shortest: *three paragraphs*), others are incredibly long, but I hope you'll enjoy each one. And while this collection is by no means the complete picture of existing interpretations, you'll find most of the others referenced, quoted, or cited throughout. You'll also notice that this collection, like the Metaphilm Web site (which I cofounded with E.J. Park in 2001 and run to this day with Peter Edman: www.metaphilm.com), incorporates a pretty complete sacred-to-profane spectrum of interpretations. If either end of the spectrum offends you, well then, as Bill Hicks used to say: Forgive me. I don't intend to offend, but when a writer

sparks an interest and evokes a response from such a wide array of readers, I think it's worth hearing what they have to say. In fact, Chuck's readership reminds me of two other books whose audiences were wide: Walker Percy's *Lost in the Cosmos*, continuously in print since it was published in 1983 and adored by everyone from *Playboy* magazine to *Christianity Today*, and one of my high school favorites, Frederick Crews's *The Pooh Perplex*, in which the author mimics various academic interpretations of the classic children's book, *Winnie-the-Pooh*, from the perspective of each discipline. Crews's work should perhaps be considered the first to conflate the highbrow academic world with the lowbrow world of popular culture. Its humor stems not only from the satirical nature of the essays, but from the perception one has upon completion that, to a man with a scholarly field, *everything* looks like a blade of grass in that field. While not all of the following pieces are in that vein, you'll find ample opportunity to mutter at each author, "You should get out more often." But then again, you probably go out far too often as it is.

Personally, I've been a fan since the film came out in 1999, and a part-time Chuck Palahniuk follower since I first saw him speak at the Astor Place Barnes & Noble in New York City. I've never seen any author pack a bookstore with a line as long as Chuck Palahniuk has. Standard procedure for his readings is to come three hours early just to get a seat in the *back*. The hardcore fans, they show up—in *costume*—in the morning for a 7:00 PM reading. After *Fight Club*, I've read everything he's written, presented two lectures at the first Chuck Palahniuk conference at the University of Edinboro, and taught his novel *Invisible Monsters* to my Expository Writing students at NYU for three years. I'm told that my teaching of his book was the sole reason that it became *Entertainment Weekly's* "Cult Book on Campus" for NYU. That could just be hearsay, but I didn't find any other professors teaching it. I know what my students told me: They bought copies for their roommates and discovered that even their mothers were reading it when they went home on break. I read the book seven times before cowriting a screenplay with one of my top students, Adam Karp, who left college in order to go work in Hollywood. Mark Twain once said that he could live six months on a good compliment.

Chuck Palahniuk said of our script: “I loved it. Especially the ending: It made me weep.” That compliment lasted me three years.

Since then, Chuck has gone darker with his material while I have tried to go lighter, and my enthusiasm for his work is perhaps best articulated by Flannery O’Connor, who said, “The theologian is interested specifically in the modern novel because there he sees reflected the man of our time, the unbeliever, who is nevertheless grappling in a desperate and usually honest way with intense problems of the spirit.” I am no theologian, but Mr. Palahniuk once described himself as a lapsed Catholic, while I would describe myself as a relapsed Anglican. Maybe it’s just age, or the effect of having seven children. But I love his work the way I still love Pink Floyd’s *The Wall*. It reminds me of a time in my youth, a time that years and wisdom only make glow with a brighter nostalgia. The Bob Dylan thesis explains a lot, too: “I was so much older then, I’m younger than that now.” In *Rant*, as in all his novels, Chuck proposes a new (and expectedly absurd) way for humans to find genuine community and transparency with one another. After a particularly gruesome car crash, one character says, “This is how church should feel.” I saw a sign in front of a parish in Maine that said: CATHOLICS CAN ALWAYS COME HOME. I don’t know if Chuck is heading home or not, but I appreciate the fear and trembling he puts into his work. Like the ghastly skulls—*memento mori*—on the desks of medieval scholars, his gruesome novels nevertheless remind me how fleeting, beautiful, and urgent life is.

On *Fight Club* I have one interpretation printed here, which incorporates some of the insights from three other interpretations, which I’ve left out for space considerations and in deference to other authors who made similar points and often in a better style. I kept collecting interpretations until it hit me: *This would make a great book*. If you like film analysis, and/or have your own unique interpretation of *Fight Club*, we’d love to see it. If it’s good enough, we might even be able to publish it on Metaphilm.

Introductory comments and author bios precede each essay. Many thanks to all our contributors, and especially to Mr. Palahniuk himself for writing the foreword for the collection.