Sacred and Immoral

Sacred and Immoral:
On the Writings of Chuck Palahniuk

Edited by

Jeffrey A. Sartain

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Sacred and Immoral: On the Writings of Chuck Palahniuk, Edited by Jeffrey A. Sartain

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Sacred and Immoral is dedicated to Dennis Widmyer and everyone at *Chuckpalahniuk.net* who have volunteered their time building one of the best literature sites on the net. This book wouldn't have been possible without everyone's uncounted hours.

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FOREWORD

MONICA DRAKE

I have an MFA in creative writing, and sometimes people ask about my grad school experience. They'll ask, was it good for you? Did you learn? Can writing really be taught?

I have no idea. What I know is that in 1996, the year *Fight Club* came out, one year after I finished grad school and the year I moved back to my hometown of Portland, Oregon, a quiet night with Chuck Palahniuk undid almost everything the academic setting encouraged me to work toward.

I read a story in front of Chuck that night. It was a reunion, of sorts. I'd been gone for so long, away at school, involved in workshops and literature seminars. I'd been off trying to learn and brought back new writing. Chuck had his first novel out. I was eager to swap stories—I'd show mine if he'd show his, and we did. His response? Rock solid disappointment. He squinted at my pages, shook his head. He couldn't cover it up.

I'd let Chuck down. He let me know.

That was okay. His disappointment was like a chiropractic adjustment, realigning my spine, curing me of what I didn't even realize had become a creeping ailment.

I felt fabulous. I could breathe again for the first time in ages.

In the fantasy of memory I see myself as though tossing a sheaf of papers over my shoulder, jumbled work raining down, my crafted narrative gamely destroyed. The moment Chuck frowned wasn't just about one story or the particular paragraphs I'd actually read. When he shook his head, it was a silent critique of all the drafts and rough drafts and polished rough drafts I'd sweated over through six semesters. It was a refutation of strange discussions held under florescent lights in bleak rooms.

I went to a big school with a small program run by writers I admire who were good teachers, too. The students worked hard, driven by aspirations. There's a photo, taken back then, of one workshop. I can look at faces in that photo now and count the novels, essays and awards racked up since.

If there was a flaw in my graduate experience, it seeped in through gaps between teachers and students. What recruiters didn't mention when I signed on was that the program was under pressure of a department-wide sexual harassment investigation. There were heated questions involving students who left before I showed up and faculty still in charge. We didn't know it, but those questions haunted our workshops. My third and final year in the program, the mystery was slightly illuminated; we all got the same anonymous, photocopied, hand-delivered letter in our school mailboxes. It was addressed to a professor, written by a former student, half accusation and half declaration of love. It was a confused note, heartfelt and burnt.

Somebody tried to pull the letter, but as a piece of writing, it inspired rapid, impromptu mini-workshops because the clandestine, the illicit, this is what turns an audience on. We stood in clusters in the hall and tried to sort information out.

Before that letter, all we knew was that the faculty stood an arm's-length off in conversation. They kept office doors open through conferences. We checked our breath. We leaned in. We waved heartfelt, confessional pages, and professors ducked farther away.

Writing is about audience. The urge to write is a need to be heard. The heat in that anonymous letter held the tension we sought in workshop. For the most part, in the program I joined, faculty listened from an uneasy emotional distance. Our audience was hazy. My writing came to reflect the disconnect.

It was Chuck Palahniuk, in collusion with author Tom Spanbauer and my own wild urges, who sent me running off to grad school to begin with. I went with the idea that writing, listening, reading aloud and taking big personal risks was some kind of pure, painful pleasure.

Chuck and I met in 1991, in the earliest days of Tom Spanbauer's now long-running "Dangerous Writing" workshop. The workshop was held in Tom's house. The house was beyond disrepair. There was a dead dog under rotting floor boards, an orange *condemned* sticker on the rattling glass of the front door. We were a self-selecting group of students: the first risk we took, as we set off to become Dangerous Writers, involved pushing open a rusted gate and walking up crumbling cement stairs on a dark Oregon night to find our way into a stranger's home.

We needed to write. Tom would teach us. He'd listen. Any trade-off in personal safety was worth it.

I had a job with the Visiting Nurse Association, typing up the health histories of people too ill to leave home, documenting ways a body can fail. Chuck worked for Freightliner. Everybody in Tom's workshop had a

day job. Some had kids. Nobody had time, but we all wrote every week. We wrote like we needed to write to live. Tom inspired that.

After each night's reading of pages was done, Tom would dim the lights and light candles and incense. We'd break out the booze. Inside that house, Tom Spanbauer showed us that writing was one big party. Nobody wanted to leave.

Over months, Tom fixed up his house. He sanded floors. Textured, then painted the walls. He found collaborators, hired contractors, worked out trades. Every week when we showed up, the place would be a little better off than the week before, until the house was a work of art.

What Tom taught us through words and actions was how to take something damaged, neglected, maybe ruined, and make it gorgeous, make it meaningful. We could take the stories of our lives and make them serve in our favor. "We are the stories we tell ourselves," he said, and we stayed in his house all night long telling each other those stories, on the page and over drinks, in candlelight and incense.

I loved the whole conversation. I wanted to go forward. I wanted to own a part of that terrain, the world of writing and ideas. In a counter-intuitive move I thought going away, going to grad school, was the route. Chuck stayed in workshop. He kept his job. He wrote his pages.

As a graduate teaching assistant, I was given a shared desk in a crowded office. There were names written on masking tape stuck to each desk, to show who could sit there. On my desk, when I moved in, there was the name of a poet. He was a poet with a book deal. His dictionary rested on the short shelf attached to the desk, with his name written in tall, thin letters across the top of all the pages. I put my books next to his books. I thought he might show up, might need the desk while I sat there grading papers. He never did though. Six months went by before I learned that this poet had killed himself back in 1990. The scary thing was, other than his suicide, that poet was one of the program's most golden success stories.

It didn't bode well.

In Tom's workshop, Chuck wrote smart, fast stories about the saddest moments—moments of human need—turned comedy. They were the kind of stories that made me want to write, in that call-and-response way. I wrote a new story every week. I didn't revise. I wrote to see who'd laugh at what I called jokes, and who'd jump on me when I let sentences knock against each other without the cushion of explanation in between. I wrote to see what Chuck would say.

In grad school, stories circulated from one workshop to the next, reappearing again and again, sentences as worn as trammeled grass. It was

like watching a friend gain weight; I saw good writing grow thick with clotted words, padded with details. There was a fear of pulling out the raw stuff, the vulnerable pages.

I started writing more slowly. Fumbling. I tried to second guess a distracted audience. Writing lost its shine. Instead of self expression, it was more like explaining minor details, repeatedly, to a stranger.

When I moved home, I brought grad school writing back to the Dangerous Writers circle, and Chuck's flash of disappointment wasn't condemnation. It was validating. It was like somebody whispering, *You don't need to fit in*; I'd been let out of high school all over again. He brought me back to the fold. Reading Chuck's pages, after being away, was a reminder of how cool writing can be, how thrilling, and how important. His work was alive. It took risks. It was all about diving into that pure, painful pleasure, smart words done well, revealing and reveling in humanity. Chuck makes it look easy, sure. He keeps it fun. The trick is, all the while he's turning out serious work that matters.

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

JEFFREY A. SARTAIN

An initial glance at the academic publications discussing Chuck Palahniuk's fiction suggests that he's done very little publishing since his first novel, *Fight Club*, in 1996. Nothing could be further from the truth. Palahniuk has been prolific, now boasting nine novels and two books of non-fiction. Already a critically-successful author, Palahniuk's work was finding readers in a local arena before David Fincher's film adaptation of *Fight Club* in 1999. By the time it was a film, *Fight Club* had won the 1997 Pacific Northwest Bookseller's Association Award and the 1997 Oregon Book Award for Best Novel. Chapters from the novel had been excerpted and published in a variety of locations, including several local-interest anthologies and *Story* magazine. After 1999, Palahniuk's writing exploded onto the national scene. *Fight Club* was quickly re-released in paperback with a movie tie-in cover, and W.W. Norton immediately published *Survivor* and *Invisible Monsters*, manuscripts they had previously rejected. Since then, Palahniuk has gained vast popular success, with every new book of his being eagerly awaited by legions of fans.

Despite his continued literary production and popularity, the academic criticism around his work still focuses largely on his first and best-known novel, *Fight Club*. This volume, *Sacred and Immoral*, is an effort by an international list of scholars and authors to shed some critical light on many of Palahniuk's later works. With eleven new critical analyses of Palahniuk's novels, *Sacred and Immoral* drastically expands the range and depth of academic inquiry into Palahniuk's fiction commensurate with the prominent and exciting position Palahniuk's work occupies in contemporary culture.

The title of this volume comes from *Invisible Monsters*, and was suggested by contributor James Dolph, who felt the phrase "sacred and immoral" (14) reflects the paradoxical position that Palahniuk's work often occupies in American culture. Now, over a decade into his literary career, Palahniuk's literature has run the gamut of responses with critics and readers. For some, his work represent represents mere shock literature, deviant and transgressive with an adolescent sensibility. For others,

Palahniuk's fiction speaks great truths about the nature of their lives, and for still others, he's a merely a ripping good read. This book is written for all those who want to explore the depths of Palahniuk's fiction, and the ways that his fiction forms a continuing discourse with the culture.

The book's introduction by Monica Drake explores Palahniuk's early roots in fiction, starting with Tom Spanbauer's "Dangerous Writing" workshops in Portland, Oregon. Drake, a "Dangerous Writing" alum and author of *Clown Girl*, offers a unique perspective on why Palahniuk's fiction remains fresh, compelling and unique.

Of the book's critical chapters, several situate Palahniuk's work within existing generic conventions. In "Chuck Palahniuk and the New Journalism Revolution," Kenneth MacKendrick traces the influence of mid-century literary journalism on Palahniuk's fiction. Cammie Sublette's chapter, "'If We're Too Lazy to Learn *History*, History, Maybe We Can Learn Plots': History in the Fiction of Chuck Palahniuk" looks at the ways popular history gets the real thing wrong, and what's at stake when Chuck Palahniuk quotes well-known historical inaccuracies. In "Tracking Conversion: A Structural Analysis of *Survivor* and *Choke*," Tatyana Shumsky details the ways that religious conversion narratives inform the secular conversion narratives of Palahniuk's narrators. And finally, in "Chuck Palahniuk's *Diary*: American Horror, Gothic, and Beyond," Heidi Ashbaugh details the ways that Palahniuk's sixth novel draws upon the various gothic literary traditions to form its new, unique vision of the gothic.

Other chapters focus on the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of Palahniuk's fiction. In "Bullets and Blades: Narcissism and Violence in *Invisible Monsters*," Andy Johnson examines Palahniuk's second novel through theories of body image and beauty, revealing how deep Palahniuk's social commentary actually cuts. Scott Ash examines how Michel Foucault's theories of discipline inform Palahniuk's fiction in "Going to the Body: The Tension of Freedom/Restraint in Palahniuk's Novels." Ash's essay dovetails naturally into Ron Riekki's "Brandy, Shannon, Tender and the Middle Finger: Althusser and Foucault in Palahniuk's Early Novels," which focuses on the social dimensions of repression. Mary McCampbell's "'Paradigms are Dissolving Left and Right': Baudrillard's Anti-Apocalypse and Chuck Palahniuk's *Survivor*" examines how the instability of the postmodern age gets reflected in *Survivor*'s narrative arc and trick ending.

Still other chapters take a more comparative approach, looking at other literature and discourses to chart some of the deeper and more interesting implications of Palahniuk's fiction. James Dolph mounts a unique and

compelling comparison in "Behind the Queens' Veils: Power Versus Powerlessness in C.S. Lewis's *Till We Have Faces* and Palahniuk's *Invisible Monsters*." Kathy Farquharson traces a vital literary connection between Palahniuk and 19th century author, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, in "The Anchoress and the Graffiti: *Diary* and 'The Yellow Wallpaper.'" And in "Invisible Carrots and Fainting Fans: Queer Humor and Abject Horror in 'Guts,'" Courtney Wennerstrom and I examine how the story and the phenomenon of fans fainting at Palahniuk's readings of "Guts" offer challenges to traditional discourses of masculinity and heteronormativity. Finally, the volume wraps up with Matt Kavanagh's previously-unpublished interview with Chuck Palahniuk. In addition, primary and secondary bibliographies of Palahniuk-related materials are included as appendices.

No book is written in a vacuum, and *Sacred and Immoral* is no exception. I want to extend a special thanks to the following individuals, who lent their support, time and energies along the way: Charles B. Harris, Jason Vest, Stephen Criniti, Erik Grayson and *Stirrings Still*, Tom Spanbauer, and Monica Drake. For special help with the bibliographies, I would like to extend special thanks the following folks who were very generous with their time, helping me locate texts scattered far and wide across North America and Europe: Adam Wood, Jason Donnelly, Janet Medina, Mara Whitten, Dan Frazier, and Courtney Nance.

Last, but certainly not least, thanks go to Chuck Palahniuk for telling great stories.

Sacred and Immoral is not an attempt to have the last word on Chuck Palahniuk's literature. Rather, this volume can serve as a springboard for other projects that relate to Palahniuk's writings. This volume provides readers with essential tools to tackle Palahniuk's work in their own research and pedagogy. So, whether you're a scholar, a teacher, or a fan, I hope you find this volume interesting and thought-provoking.

Jeffrey A. Sartain
December 17, 2008
Bloomington, Indiana

CHAPTER ONE

CHUCK PALAHNIUK AND THE NEW JOURNALISM REVOLUTION[1]

KENNETH MACKENDRICK

> "You know, it is really hard to call it my vision in the first place. Because what I do is so much more like journalism, where I am sort of conducting a field study or an enormous survey and I am depicting that in a narrative."
> – Chuck Palahniuk (Raffensperger)

> "Journalism made me a good minimalist."
> – Chuck Palahniuk (Castillo 20)

Outside of occasional references to individual journalists, such as Joan Didion or Hunter Thompson, to the best of my knowledge, Chuck Palahniuk has never specifically mentioned the influence of New Journalism on his fiction. Although it is likely that he was familiar with literary nonfiction before entering the University of Oregon's journalism program, I argue that there is ample evidence to support the claim that Palahniuk's work is thoroughly versed in the tone, style, and genre of the New Journalists. Making this connection explicit goes a long way in developing a deeper understanding of his style as well as explaining the dichotomous reception his work has received: expansive affection and praise or vitriolic contempt and condemnation. The following essay has three parts. The first part examines the energy and literary qualities of New Journalism, especially as portrayed by Tom Wolfe. The second part outlines similarities in the style and themes of New Journalism and Palahniuk's writing. Finally, I provide an explanation for the overlap and speculate about the nature of the reception of both.

The best way to describe the energy of New Journalism is to reiterate Tom Wolfe's reaction to an essay written by Gay Talese on an aging Joe Louis, written in 1962. This is the introductory paragraph from Talese's essay about Louis, who is meeting his wife in an airport:

> "Hi, sweetheart!" Joe Louis called to his wife, spotting her waiting for him at the Los Angeles airport.
>
> She smiled, walked toward him, and was about to step up on her toes and kiss him–but suddenly stopped.
>
> "Joe," she said, "where's your tie?"
>
> "Aw, sweetie," he said shrugging, "I stayed out all night in New York and didn't have time—"
>
> "All *night*!" she cut in. "When you're out here all you do is sleep, sleep, sleep."
>
> "Sweetie," Joe Louis said, with a tired grin, "I'm an ole man."
>
> "Yes," she agreed, "but when you go to New York you try to be young again." (Talese 317)

And there, reading this essay in *Esquire* magazine after lunch in the open air pit of the *Herald Tribune*, in a room filled with smoke and the stench of sweat and deadline, Tom Wolfe is screaming out, "*What inna namea Christ is this!*" Who did this scribbler Talese think he was? He must have piped it, winged it, made up the dialogue. Maybe even whole scenes . . . the unscrupulous geek. The bastard is making it up! I'm telling you, Ump, that's a *spitball* he's throwing! (Wolfe, "Like a Novel" 10, 11; McKeen 9).

Wolfe didn't know what it was, but he took it to heart with a passion before it had a name. It was eventually and hesitantly dubbed the New Journalism and Wolfe became its most ardent practitioner and reluctant chronicler.[2] The article by Talese opened Wolfe's eyes to a new form of reportage that incorporated the techniques of literature (McKeen 10). His groundbreaking essay was entitled "There Goes (Varoom! Varoom!) That Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby around the Bend." It appeared in *Esquire* in 1963, back when *Esquire* was audacious enough to take journalism and fiction more seriously (and with a better sense of humor) than its competition.[3] Readers were puzzled and fascinated by Wolfe's essay on car customizing. There was no chronology and no history of the automobile industry. There were no traditional interviews. Wolfe interjected his own voice and his own thoughts into the text. The essay did not deal with irresponsible teenagers or the decline of the American empire. It talked about young automobile freaks. But it didn't call them freaks. The kids became artists. Streamline became baroque and curves and swoops became Dionysian. The entire report was written with great flare and sympathy and exhibition. These hot rod speed demon teenagers who were living fast and squandering their youth and money were depicted as harbingers of a new Renaissance in American culture. Wolfe wrote that this new breed of teenager was really a precursor to the future. Popular Culture, with a big C, a Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline future, yes! (McKeen 27). And Wolfe didn't even have the

decency to blush; he jumped right in. Car freaks, young millionaire music producers, Pump House surfers, hair boys, prison girls, Black Panthers, socialites, stockcar racers, erstwhile aristocrats, as well as Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters. Around the bend, baby!

Wolfe wrote about anything and everything having to do with the erosion and transformation of status and social position. The future he saw was not the etiquette and social mores of the previous generation but a new, younger set. The old paternal charisma of the feudal system had been swept away. The euphoria of the ancient status honors of the feast were becoming a thing of the past (Wolfe, *Pump House* 187-89). The new was:

> Bangs manes bouffants beehives beatle caps butter faces brush-on lashes decal eyes puffy sweaters French thrust bras flailing leather blue jeans stretch pants stretch jeans honeydew bottoms eclair shanks elf boots ballerinas Knight slippers, hundreds of them, these flaming little buds, bobbing and screaming, rocketing around inside . . . Aren't they super-marvelous! (Wolfe, *Kandy-Kolored* 199).

Indeed, aren't they super-marvelous. Wolfe often maintained that he was simply "the humble chronicler, just the secretary taking notes" (Wolfe qtd. in McKeen 24). This comment is somewhat at odds with what he's actually doing. Consider "The Voices of Village Square," a story about the hell-hole of a Women's House of Detention on the South side of Greenwich Avenue. The prisoners are Sirens that call out to passersby, "Hai-ai-ai-ai-ai-ai-ai-reeeeee!" Wolfe loves it and wants in on the action too, crying out,

> O, dear, sweet Harry, with your French gangster-movie bangs, your Ski Shop turtleneck sweater and your Army-Navy Store blue denim shirt over it, with your Bloomsbury corduroy pants you saw in the *Manchester Guardian* airmail edition and sent away for and your sly intellectual pigeon-toed libido roaming in Greenwich Village—is that siren call really for you? (226)

But, he's just a fly on the wall, right? The humble chronicler, just letting that Greenwich Village hipster have it. But isn't it kind of like the reader, who always wants to cry out with the Sirens to the poor bastard Harry, the eighth man in thirty minutes to find himself called Harry or Johnny or Bill or Frankie or Honey or Sammy or Max (Wolfe, *Kandy-Kolored* 313-15; "Like a Novel," 16-17). Wolfe lets the reader participate in the story by acting in it himself. Perhaps this is what he meant when he wrote about New Journalism being "some sort of artistic excitement" (Wolfe, "Seizing," 23).

Until the 1960s, Wolfe tells us, journalism had been very straight-laced. Only the facts, thank you. He called this "totem journalism." "A totem newspaper," Wolfe writes, "is the kind of newspaper that people don't really buy to read but just to *have*, physically, because they know it supports their own outlook on life." The totem story was the story that you're supposed to read, supposed have with you when you carry the totem paper (Wolfe qtd. in McKeen 24). It is like a boring religion that everyone has but no one cares about. Or the religion that everyone thinks they have to have but don't really care about. Wolfe wanted to write and report differently, and he wanted journalism to respond to and document the upheavals in society going on around them. However, because social realities were changing, journalism needed to change. Wolfe came to the conclusion that totem journalism ceased to be journalism at all. The "artistic excitement" Wolfe speaks of is nothing short of the thoughtful response of journalists to the tumultuous events of their society, a form of writing mindful of the reader.

Gay Talese, George Plimpton, Truman Capote, Jimmy Breslin, Joan Didion, John Gregory Dunne, Norman Mailer, Terry Southern and Hunter Thompson. These are just a few of the "new journalists" featured in Tom Wolfe and E. W. Johnson's seminal anthology, *The New Journalism*. There was no club, no manifesto, and no planning. New Journalism was a grassroots movement. It sought to capture the spirit of the times and the motion of being present, whether that meant being on the bus, at the march, with the team, or in the room with the up-and-coming or the fading and falling. Or, in the case of Hunter Thompson, it was about getting kicked off the bus, skipping the march, forgetting about the team and hooking up with a newfound friend for an evening of madcap adventure.

Between 1965 and 1968, a series of publications appeared that, each in their own way, infused journalism with an array of literary techniques. Plimpton trained with the Detroit Lions. Thompson rode with the Hell's Angels. Didion moved to San Francisco for a study of the hippie scene. Mailer documented his participation and arrest in an anti-war march, and Truman Capote invented the nonfiction novel with a textured account of the murder of the Clutter family of Holcomb, Kansas. All of these works appeared within a few years of one another, alongside Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* and some thirty-seven articles in an impressive array of anthologies. Some people loved it, especially a younger generation. Many hated it.

A lot of people hate Chuck Palahniuk's writing too. He's been identified as misogynist, a nihilist, and an American pornographer, not always in that order. Although *Fight Club* earned Palahniuk modest

literary accolades, his later works including *Diary, Haunted*, *Rant,* and *Snuff* have faired less favorably in many quarters.[4] Interestingly, the criticism of Palahniuk's writing bears an uncanny similarity to the criticism New Journalists receive, particularly Tom Wolfe. Both Palahniuk and Wolfe are often identified by reviewers as unscrupulous geeks. Let us recall that, as Katherine Dunn reminds us, a geek is the one with the sharp choppers biting the head off a live chicken, a carnival performer, a charlatan, a para-journalist, a shock-jock writer with an audience of teenage pot-heads. Paired in this way, we are told by critics that Wolfe and Palahniuk aren't serious writers. This isn't journalism; this isn't literature. It is as if many of the critics have responded to Wolfe and Palahniuk the same way that Wolfe had initially responded to Talese: they're piping it, winging it, throwing spit balls. We read that Palahniuk is a plagiarist and that Wolfe is making it all up, fakers.

Reviews of Wolfe's writings were almost identical in tone, style, and condemnation to reviews of Palahniuk's work. There are four common criticisms of both, suggesting their work is:

1. poorly written, lacking proper respect and appreciation for the conventions of literature.
2. of baneful influence, leading to the corruption of the youth and contributing to the degenerative tendencies of society.
3. nothing more than a revelry of style over substance.
4. written by hacks of questionable moral character.[5]

I could add a fifth, although not a criticism of the writer or writing as such: many reviewers opting for such an all out assault also take a few good jabs or power stomps at the supposed pud-knockers who read the purported trash, usually identifying them as dupes impressed by little more than bread and circuses.[6]

This is not a critique of criticism, appropriate or inappropriate. What I am interested in is the nature of what has prompted such an acerbic reception. What is it about Palahniuk and Wolfe's writing that allows critical reviews to be virtually interchangeable? I speculate that there is a potential link between the minimalist style and marginal edge of Palahniuk's work and the "artistic excitement" of the New Journalism described by Wolfe. While there are numerous issues that could be addressed here, I'll encapsulate my interests in two questions. First, why is the reception of minimalist literature similar to the reception of New Journalism; and second, how are the two related?

As previously observed, Palahniuk has not openly acknowledged a debt to New Journalist writing specifically, although he has mentioned

Joan Didion and George Plimpton as significant influences on his writing and style. He has made occasional mention of the personality of Hunter Thompson but usually not in references to Thompson's journalism.[7] Perhaps one only needs to ask to have a definitive answer. However, barring this, there is enough biographical material available to draw a few tentative lines between relations of influence.

To begin, Palahniuk is a journalist and a fan of journalism. One of his favorite short story writers, Denis Johnson, recently published a series of nonfiction essays called *Seek: Reports from the Edges of America and Beyond*. It would be difficult to conceive that this is not high on Palahniuk's reading list. He's also a reader of Jon Krakauer, author of *Into the Wild*, a writer recently identified as a "new new journalist." I would also be surprised if Palahniuk hadn't read *Among the Thugs* by Bill Buford, a participatory journalist, who documents his tour with football hooligans; the beating he receives at the end of the account is eerily akin to Thompson's account of his own beating at the end of *Hell's Angels*.[8] When readers of Palahniuk have commented on the accuracy of the psychological portrait of violence he's depicted, I can't help but recall the near mimesis of Palahniuk's writing to Buford's brilliant case study of interpersonal violence. While Palahniuk has mentioned the influence of Hemingway, whose collection *Men without Women* includes writings on boxing, and Thom Jones's, *The Pugilist at Rest* and *Cold Snap* as well as Jack London's *The Abysmal Brute*,, one might also add to this George Plimpton's participatory account of boxing in his book *Shadow Box*. It may simply be a coincidence that Joyce Carol Oates and Norman Mailer have also written about boxing in the tradition of literary nonfiction. Katherine Dunn, whose award winning novel *Geek Love* is one of Palahniuk's favorite books makes a personal appearance in *Fugitives and Refugees*. Dunn has also been hailed as a peerless boxing commentator (Starr). Certainly the brutality of a community in ruins, documented thoughtfully by Joan Didion in "Slouching towards Bethlehem," is never far from central themes in Palahniuk's work. And, how can we not see echoes of Norman Mailer throughout Palahniuk's writings? In *The Armies of the Night,* Mailer observes about himself that he never "felt more like an American than when he was . . . obscene" (48). Similarly, commenting on the content of his novels in an interview with Bob Strauss, Palahniuk remarks that "My theory, in a way, is you can have people doing profane things if they're doing it for a profound reason" adding that darkly comic tales help people cope with the unavoidable tragedies of life. Palahniuk, like Mailer before him, seems to hold dear to the idea that our obscenity may save us (Mailer 48-49). Lastly, there are remarkable similarities with

the nefarious pranks of so many of Palahniuk's protagonists with the ultimate prankster Guy Grand from New Journalist Terry Southern's hilarious novella, *The Magic Christian*. Among other things, Grand makes several eclectic and unnerving inserts to the movies showing in a theatre he has purchased, each designed to spoil the film (54-57).

While this scarcely shows a literary continuity, it may be helpful to note that the two giants, New Journalist Tom Wolfe and minimalist Gordon Lish can be found together in *The Secret Life of Our Times: New Fiction from Esquire* along with essays by Raymond Carver, Joy Williams, and Joyce Carol Oates – all of whom Palahniuk has mentioned as influences on his writing. Other students of Gordon Lish include Tom Spanbauer (perhaps one of the most important influences on Palahniuk's writing), Amy Hempel, and Mark Richard. No dedicated reader of Palahniuk can avoid Amy Hempel's *At the Gates of the Animal Kingdom* or Richard's *Ice at the Bottom of the World.* The short story "Strays" by Richard is to *Fight Club* what "The Harvest" by Hempel is to *Invisible Monsters*. Given that Palahniuk wrote the latest introduction to Ken Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (Penguin, 2007), it is almost inconceivable that he hasn't read Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test.*

My colleague Nicole Goulet did manage to find a single reference to "gonzo journalism" in an interview conducted by Jorge Ignacio Castillo in *Prairie Dog*, where Palahniuk criticized the style and practice of gonzo journalism as being too self-indulgent. When I read this, I couldn't help but chuckle, since there are at least two "gonzo" accounts within his nonfiction. Recall his anonymous postcards in *Fugitives and Refugees* about grinding his molars on acid (a postcard from 1981) and about slurping back gin from a Windex bottle dressed up as Santa Claus in the Cacophony Society's annual Santa Rampage (a postcard from 1996). Perhaps it was advocacy journalism in retrospect. However, his essay "My Life as a Dog" in *Stranger than Fiction* strikes me as more than just a little participatory.[9] And, of course, Palahniuk has been very open about his volunteer work for an AIDS hospice, which influenced *Fight Club*, as well as about his attendance of sex addicts' support meetings for *Choke* (Interviews with Sirius and Epstein).

One of the rather obvious distinctions between New Journalism and Palahniuk's work is that Palahniuk is writing fiction. Yet, if I can speculate, what makes his fiction controversial, aside from its explicit content, which is neither new nor uncommon, is how it uses the advantages and energy of New Journalism and literary nonfiction. Instead of infusing journalism with literary techniques, Palahniuk infuses literature with the techniques of New Journalism. His books are loaded with facts,

however dubious: recipes for explosives (*Fight Club*), instructions for how to eat a lobster (*Survivor*), morbid medical details (*Choke*), and even a foray into world religions (*Lullaby*) and ritual theory (*Rant*). These factoids are always caught up in the motion of the narrative, yet they work very much like the life status details so important to New Journalists.

The first person accounts found throughout his novels are reminiscent of the autobiographical form, and we know there are a lot of biographies and autobiographies that have made their way into his writings: *Edie* by Jean Stein edited by George Plimpton, *Truman Capote* edited by George Plimpton, *Lexicon Devil* on the short life and times of Darby Crash, the semi-autobiographical *Heartburn* by Nora Ephron, *Slackjaw* by Jim Knipfel, the infamous *Miss Rona* by Rona Barrett, and *Autobiography of a Face* by Lucy Grealy. Although Palahniuk hasn't mentioned it, there is also the 1970 novel *Attic* by Katherine Dunn, a semi-autobiographical and poignant account of the time she spent in jail for attempting to cash bad checks. These are only a handful of the books or authors Palahniuk has mentioned in the past decade of interviews. All of them lean toward being on the bus: autobiography, oral biography; these are fly-on-the-wall accounts, wallflower-at-the-orgy accounts as Ephron would have said. It is no wonder that Palahniuk has mentioned Joan Didion so often. Her journalism, like her novels, is narrated close to the realm of experience. She writes like the reader thinks and feels: repetitious thoughts, ambience, and indecision. The intense link between Didion's writing and her personal experience has been clearly evident, at the very least, since *Where I Was From*, where she provides a tough and critical account of her own novel *Run River*. The connection between lived experience and the techniques utilized by New Journalists is fascinating. Every chapter of every book Palahniuk has written could readily be summarized on a sheet no larger than a postcard. This veritable seven page limit is the epitome of scene-to-scene development. As Gay Talese observes, it's "just like a movie." In the essay "Frank Sinatra Has a Cold," Talese notes that it is written scene by scene: "the first scene is a bar, the second in a nightclub, the third scene in the NBC studio" (qtd in Boynton 367). Palahniuk's *Choke* even has a special graphic at the front of each chapter to let the reader know what the next scene is about. It shouldn't be surprising that some of the writings of the New Journalists or New New Journalists have appeared in film, from Wolfe's *The Right Stuff* and Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* to Susan Orlean's *Blue Crush* and *Adaptation*, and Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*. It also shouldn't be surprising that with the exception of *Snuff* (at least at the time of writing), all of Palahniuk's novels have been optioned.

These parallels in literary technique may explain why people react the way they do to Palahniuk's fiction. But the parallels go still further. Wolfe wrote about status, insider and outsider, fashion, celebrity, and changing mores. He was interested in social movements and cultural change, especially when it comes to issues of wealth and power. He focused on the Merry Pranksters, car customizers, teenage tycoons, and the radical chic. His electrifying style reflected what he was writing about, turbulent convulsions in society. As a novelist, Palahniuk is not subject to the same constraints that a journalist is, even when his writing is based on the experiences of his friends. Nevertheless, in addition to using the techniques of New Journalism to inform his literary technique, he appears to dwell on one of its most successful themes: the little man or little woman, the figure in trouble with the law, the delinquent, the infirm or deprived.[10] In this respect Palahniuk's interests are closer to those of Talese, who has more admiration for the heroic failure than Wolfe, who focuses more on the rising star.

The fictional oral biography in *Rant* is particularly remarkable and is the clearest exposition of the link between his fiction and New Journalism. Two of the three sources that he cites in the introduction were edited by New Journalist George Plimpton. *Rant* is a science fiction novel but one that uses the medium of oral biography to tell the story. This gives him the advantages of an oral biography, its substance and multiple perspectives, but it also allows him to give his literary imagination free reign. He seems to be well aware that he's producing an innovative construal of literature and journalism in his writing. For instance, in the introduction to *Stranger than Fiction* he writes that "It's hard to call any of my novels 'fiction'" (xvii). In another essay in the same collection, he remarks that the novel *Fight Club* is "less a novel than an anthology of my friends' lives" (228). What is interesting about Palahniuk's research is its range: the lives of his friends, medical textbooks, journalism, autobiography, and even novels themselves. Almost anything and everything can be used in a story.

For example, in *Fight Club,* the narrator prays for the plane to crash. This is similar to Maria from Joan Didion's *Play It as It Lays*, who like Palahniuk's narrator, cries a lot and bleeds a lot. And, shortly after dreaming of being in a car crash, she decides to become the radical surgeon of her own life: never discuss, cut. In *Fight Club* the narrator works for a car company that is responsible for people being burned alive in cars that are not designed properly. An insidious scandal, just like Tom Wolfe's empathetic essay on fighter pilots "burned beyond recognition" in *The Right Stuff*. Wolfe also has a chapter on space monkeys who push buttons and pull levers. In Nora Ephron's *Heartburn*, a novel constructed

out of many of her essays in *Wallflower at the Orgy*, *Crazy Salad*, and *Scribble Scribble*, we find a lead character who joins a support group, an apartment that is blown up, and a story about someone who fantasizes about being in a plane crash. In Joy Williams' *Breaking and Entering* there is a woman who breaks her ankle with a hammer to feel better, a nude beach, a penguin bludgeoned to death, a desire to die, a woman with cancer, mysterious phone calls with no callers, an apocalyptic vision, and insomnia. Williams has also written a tour guide of Florida and a collection of narrative-driven essays on the fallacies of militant humanism which Palahniuk continues to praise as heart-breaking. It is difficult not to bring to mind the lethal contagion found in *Lullaby* as a mirror of Williams' understanding of "ill nature." Everywhere we turn, we find the influence of a New Journalist or some sort of literary nonfiction on Palahniuk's writing.[11]

It is perhaps not without a bit of grotesque irony that Palahniuk's confirmation saint was St. Lawrence, patron saint of cooking, who was barbequed alive on a grill for his journalistic investigation of papal abuses (qtd. in O'Hagan). While Palahniuk has always been quick to announce that his work is based on nonfiction, I think it worth specifying that his writing has a particular debt to New Journalism because of extensive overlap in both technique and theme. Wolfe writes about popular culture, status, and celebrity. He's interested in the up-and-coming. The future face of America. Palahniuk, however, is interested in the margins. The wrestlers rather than the boxers. The Midwestern combine demolition derby racers rather than the stock car racers. Sexuality and gender bending rather than more or less alternative forms of commune and community. The alienated rather than the radical chic. The parallel is extraordinary.

So, what does it all mean? The New Journalists sought to re-think the relation between reporting and journalistic objectivity. They wanted to write their subject matter in a way that became more alive, less scripted. This was best accomplished through the use of literary techniques: dialogue, scene-to-scene movement, third person perspective and life-status details, what would today be called branding. Take, for instance, this passage from Bret Ellis's *Less than Zero*: "In the kitchen, Trent's mother is smoking a cigarette and finishing a Tab before she goes off to some fashion show in Century City" (53). This statement creates a stronger impression than "She finished a soda and went to a fashion show downtown."[12] Life-status details. The use of literary techniques allowed the New Journalist to let the reader enter into the narrative. New Journalism had to compete with television and the new electronic media. However, movies and television have been around for several decades

now. Palahniuk is competing with video games and the internet. He's facing a similar challenge and has responded in kind.

In addition to appropriations from New Journalism, Palahniuk's writing makes use of literary techniques indebted to minimalism, especially as taught by Tom Spanbauer: "horses," the repetition of certain stock phrases to orient the reader, "burnt tongue," a way of writing that slows the reader down, "recording angel," allowing the judgment to take place in the readers mind rather than on the page, and writing "on the body," to aim to evoke a physical response in the reader (141-46). The techniques summarized by Palahniuk are remarkable in their overlap with the four elements discussed by Wolfe. In both New Journalism and minimalism there is an effort to release the reader from a historical narrative into a scene-by-scene construction. The style encourages the reader to get carried away, to participate in the narrative by yelling out with the Sirens at Harry or Max passing by; or to break out in a cold sweat and forget to breathe while listening to "Guts." More than this, what Palahniuk identifies as writing the body reflects the kind of details that participatory or immersion journalism is interested in: "close-to-the-skin reporting" (Boynton xvii).

Of course, New Journalism accomplishes this in the third person. Palahniuk almost always writes in the first person, but the effect is similar. The narrative is oriented by using the same "horses" – the rules of *Fight Club*, for example. Wolfe and Palahniuk are known for their riveting and organic dialogue and both try to create a pulse of expression and exchange. The exuberance of this form of expression is something that Pauline Kael mentioned to Wolfe when they were on a panel together. Recounting the conversation, Wolfe writes that Kael remarked:

> One of the worst defects of the New Journalism is that it's 'non-critical.' She explains that it merely gets people 'excited,' and 'you are left not knowing how to feel about it except to be excited about it,' which she considers morally enervating for young people, 'because the same way they go for movies that have intensity and excitement, they like writing that has intensity and excitement. But it leaves them no basis at all for evaluating the material, and ultimately it simply means that the writing has to go from one change to the next' (qtd. in Wolfe, "Appendix" 37-38).

She could have been talking about Palahniuk, since Palahniuk seems to be articulating a variation of the nonfiction novel, oriented more toward fiction than nonfiction. When he incorporates facts into his novels they present historical or scientific details that key the reader into a stable world, just as the life status details found in Wolfe's writings.[13]

Palahniuk's incorporation of research slows and orients the reader from the general disorder of the narrative by presenting supposedly timeless truths; his novels are littered with phrases like "useful information," "just for the record," or "true fact." Whatever the insanity, at least you can feel safe with the knowledge of what a venous air embolism is (*Snuff* 85). In this way Palahniuk makes use of a rhetorical mechanism that creates a remarkable tension: the quiet pace of status details versus the acceleration of dialogue and scene-by-scene motion. He uses these details, however trivial, to punctuate his fiction, to slow it down. In doing so, whether he draws on the lives of his friends, adopts stories from books he's read, or adapts passages from etiquette guides, he infuses his work with an aura of journalistic integrity that very likely reminds readers of their (sub)conscious familiarity with New Journalism or literary nonfiction.

Readers may also observe that there is always in Palahniuk's novels the appearance of a certain kind of social realism, a presentation of social reality integral to his work. I think aspects of this come from the New Journalism revolution and is one of the things making his writing effective. Importantly though, it is helpful to notice that what appears as social realism is a rhetorical effect. For instance, it is only the medical certainty spread throughout the oral biography of *Rant* that makes the narrative plausible. Green Taylor Simms has to tell us that the "black widow spider only kills about 5 percent of those it bites" (71). In effect, without characters such as Simms or Phoebe Truffeau, the epidemiologist, *Rant* would lose the gritty realism that makes its magical qualities palpable and compelling for the reader.

If New Journalism aims to infuse journalism with the techniques of literature it also aims to replace literature that is unrealistic. Wolfe was very open about his hostility to neo-Fabulist writers, writings that abandon social realism in favor of myth and fable and fantasy. Palahniuk is working from the opposite direction. The chapters in his novels read like essays, yet they include moments of magic, precognition, ghosts, and time travel. The stylistic devices that Palahniuk uses, especially the relationships between his fiction, autobiography, and journalism. go a long way in explaining the uncanny similarities in the critical responses to both New Journalism and minimalism.

Many of the criticisms of Palahniuk and Wolfe far exceed a comment or critique on the literary merits or perceived political influence of the writing. Why the overbearing and excessive nature of the critical responses? Some of the responses are no doubt honest and thoughtful. For example, from an aesthetic viewpoint there are technical problems and consistency issues in his novels. However, I am putting these concerns to