

Biography for Chuck Palahniuk

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Chuck Palahniuk, February 28, 2006, on the *Roses and Shit* 2006 tour at the University of British Columbia

Born: February 21, 1962, Pasco, Washington

Occupation: Novelist, freelance journalist

Genre: Satire, Literary Movement: Postmodern

Influences: Amy Hempel, Gordon Lish, Ira Levin

Magnum opus: (Latin meaning *great work*, refers to the best, most popular, or most renowned achievement of an author, artist, or composer): *Fight Club*

Website: chuckpalahniuk.net

Charles Michael "Chuck" Palahniuk (born February 21, 1962) is an American satirical novelist and freelance journalist living in Portland, Oregon. He is best known for the award-winning novel *Fight Club*, which was later made into a film directed by David Fincher. He has one of the largest centralized followings of any author on the Internet, based around his official web site. His writings, similar in style to those of such peers as Bret Easton Ellis, Irvine Welsh, and Douglas Coupland, have made him one of the most popular novelists of Generation X.

Biography

Palahniuk was born in Pasco, Washington, the son of Carol and Fred Palahniuk, and grew up living in a mobile home in Burbank, Washington, with his family. His parents later separated and divorced, often leaving him and his three siblings to live with their grandparents at their cattle ranch in eastern Washington.^[2]

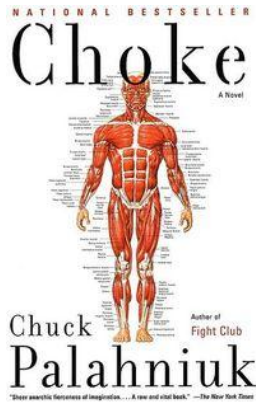
Chuck Palahniuk, September 21, 2004, on tour at the University at Albany to promote *Diary*.

In his twenties, Palahniuk attended the University of Oregon's School of Journalism, graduating in 1986. While attending college, he worked as an intern for National Public Radio's KLCC in Eugene, Oregon. He moved to Portland soon afterwards. After writing

for the local newspaper for a short while, he began working for Freightliner as a diesel mechanic, continuing in that job until his writing career took off. During that time, he also wrote manuals on fixing trucks and had a short stint as a journalist (a job he did not return to until after he became a successful novelist). After casually attending a free, introductory seminar held by an organization called Landmark Education, Palahniuk quit his job as a journalist in 1988.^[3] Wanting to do more with his life than just his job, Palahniuk did volunteer work for a homeless shelter. Later, he also volunteered at a hospice as an escort; he provided transportation for terminally ill people and brought them to support group meetings. He ceased volunteering upon the death of a patient to whom he had grown attached.^[4]

Palahniuk would also become a member of the rebellious Cacophony Society in his adulthood. He is a regular participant in their events, including the annual Santa Rampage (a public Christmas party involving pranks and drunkenness) in Portland. His participation in the Society inspired some of the events in his writings, both fictional and non-fictional.^[5] Most notably, he used the Cacophony Society as the basis for Project Mayhem in *Fight Club*.

Palahniuk began writing fiction in his mid-thirties. By his recount, he started writing while attending writer's workshops, hosted by Tom Spanbauer, which he attended to meet new friends. Spanbauer largely inspired Palahniuk's minimalist writing style. His first book, *Insomnia: If You Lived Here, You'd Be Home Already*, was never published due to his disappointment with the story (though a small part of it would be salvaged for use in *Fight Club*). When he attempted to publish his next novel, *Invisible Monsters*, publishers rejected it for being too disturbing. This led him to work on his most famous novel, *Fight Club*, which he wrote as an attempt to disturb the publisher even more for rejecting him. Palahniuk wrote this story in his spare time while working for Freightliner. After initially publishing it as a short story in the compilation *Pursuit of Happiness* (which would become chapter 6 of the novel), Palahniuk expanded it into a full novel, which – contrary to his expectations – the publisher was willing to publish.^[6] While the original hardcover edition of the book received positive reviews and some awards, it had a short shelf life. Nevertheless, the book made its way to Hollywood, where interest in adapting it to film was growing. The film was eventually completed in 1999 by director David Fincher. The film was a box office disappointment (although it was #1 at the U.S. box office in its first weekend) and critical reaction was mixed, but a cult following soon emerged as the DVD of the film was popular upon release. The novel has been re-released three times in paperback, in 1999, in 2004 (with a new introduction by the author about the success of the film adaptation), and in 2005 (with an after word by Palahniuk).



Cover to *Choke*, Palahniuk's first best seller

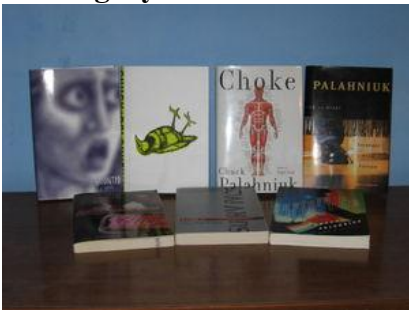
While not all fans of the film realized that it was based on a novel, many fans did, and a fan base for the author's work soon began to form. A revised version of *Invisible Monsters*, as well as his fourth novel, *Survivor*, were also published that year, allowing Palahniuk to become a cult figure himself. A few years later Palahniuk managed to make his first *New York Times* bestseller, the novel *Choke*. From then on, Palahniuk's later books would often meet with similar success. Such success has allowed him to go on book tours to promote his books, where he reads from both new and upcoming works. The year 1999 brought great personal tragedy to Palahniuk's life. At that time, his father, Fred Palahniuk, had started dating a woman named Donna Fontaine whom he had met through a personal ad under the title "Kismet". Fontaine had recently put her ex-boyfriend Dale Shackleford in prison for sexual abuse. Shackleford had vowed to kill Fontaine as soon as he was released from prison. Palahniuk believes that through her personal ad, Fontaine was looking for "the biggest man she could find" to protect her from Shackleford and Palahniuk's father fit this description.^[7] After his release, Shackleford followed Fontaine and the senior Palahniuk to Fontaine's home in Kendrick, Idaho, after they had gone out for a date. Shackleford then shot them both and dragged their bodies into Fontaine's cabin home, which he set on fire immediately afterwards. In the spring of 2001, Shackleford was found guilty for two counts of murder in the first degree and sentenced to death. In the wake of these events, Palahniuk began working on the novel *Lullaby*. According to him, he wrote the novel to help him cope with having helped decide to have Shackleford get the death sentence.

In September 2003, Palahniuk was interviewed by *Entertainment Weekly's* Karen Valby. During the interview, Palahniuk in confidence mentioned information pertaining to his partner. While it had been previously believed by many that he was married to a woman (some members of the press had claimed he had a wife), Palahniuk had in fact been living with his boyfriend. Some time later, Palahniuk believed that Valby was going to print this information in her article, without his consent. In response, he put an angry audio recording of himself on his web site, not only revealing that he is gay, but also making negative comments about Valby and a member of her family. However, Palahniuk's fears turned out to be ungrounded, and Valby's article did not reveal anything about his personal life outside of the fact that he is unmarried. The recording was later removed from the website, making some fans believe that Palahniuk is embarrassed of his

homosexuality. According to Dennis Widmyer, the site's webmaster, the recording was not removed because of the statements regarding his sexuality, but because of the statements about Valby. Palahniuk would later post a new recording to his site, asking his fans not to overreact to these events. He also apologized for his behavior, claiming that he wished he had not recorded the message.^[8]

While on his 2003 tour to promote his novel *Diary*, Palahniuk read to his audiences a short story titled *Guts*, a tale of accidents involving masturbation which appears in his book *Haunted*. It was reported that over 35 people fainted while listening to the readings (although it is possible that many of these incidents were staged by Palahniuk's fans for humorous effect).^[9] *Playboy* magazine would later publish the story in their March 2004 issue; Palahniuk offered to let them publish another story along with it, but the publishers found the second work too disturbing. On his tour to promote *Stranger Than Fiction: True Stories* in the summer of 2004, he read the story to audiences again, bringing the total amount of fainters up to 53, and later up to 60, while on tour to promote the soft cover edition of *Diary*. The last fainting occurred in November, 2004, in Durham, North Carolina. Palahniuk is apparently not bothered by these incidents, which have not stopped fans from reading "Guts" or his other works.

Writing style



Several hardcover and paperback copies of books by Chuck Palahniuk. The wall behind them is cornflower blue, a reoccurring "chorus" in Palahniuk's books. Clockwise from the top: *Haunted*, *Lullaby*, *Choke*, *Stranger Than Fiction: True Stories*, *Invisible Monsters*, *Survivor*, and *Fight Club*.

Palahniuk's books prior to *Lullaby* have distinct similarities. The characters are people who have been marginalized in one form or another by society, and who react with often self-destructive aggressiveness (a form of story that the author likes to describe as transgressional fiction). Through these tales, he attempts to comment on the current problems of society, such as materialism. However, with the controversy surrounding written works with such themes in the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001, Palahniuk chose to start writing with a more subtle approach to get the same messages across. Starting with *Lullaby*, his novels have been satirical horror stories. Though different in plot from previous books, they still contained many similarities to earlier works.

The narratives of Palahniuk's books often start at the temporal end, with the protagonist recounting the events that led up to the point at which the book begins. *Lullaby* used a

variation of this, alternating between the normal, linear narrative and the temporal end after every few chapters. However, exceptions to this narrative include *Choke* and *Diary* (which were more linear). There is often a major plot twist that is revealed near the end of the book which relates in some way to this temporal end (what Palahniuk refers to as "the hidden gun"). His more linear works, while not starting the same, would also include similar plot twists.

Palahniuk's writing style takes much of its inspiration from such writers as Gordon Lish and Amy Hempel. In what the author refers to as a minimalist approach, his writings use a limited vocabulary and short sentences to mimic the way that an average person telling a story would talk. In an interview, he said that he prefers to write in verbs instead of adjectives. Repetitions of certain lines in the stories' narratives (what Palahniuk refers to as "choruses") are one of the most common aspects of his writing style, found dispersed within most chapters of his novels. Palahniuk has said that there are also some choruses between novels; the color cornflower blue and the city of Missoula, Montana, are said to appear in all of his books. However, Palahniuk is best known for the cynical and ironic black humor that appears throughout his work. It is the mix of this sense of humor and the bizarre events around which these stories revolve (considered discomforting by some readers) that has resulted in Palahniuk being sometimes labeled as a "shock writer" by members of the media.

When not writing fiction, Palahniuk tends to write short non-fiction works. Working as a freelance journalist in between books, he writes essays and reports on a variety of subjects; he sometimes participates in the events of these writings, which are heavy in field research. He has also written interviews with celebrities, such as Juliette Lewis and Marilyn Manson. These works appear in various magazines and newspapers, such as the *Los Angeles Times* and *Gear* magazine. Some of these writings have shown up in his book *Stranger Than Fiction: True Stories*. Outside of his non-fiction work, Palahniuk also includes some non-fiction factoids within his fictional works. According to the author, these are included in order to further immerse the reader in his work. On the other hand, a number of these "factoids" are in fact false or misleading, whether intentionally or not.

Criticism

Some critics have labeled him as a "shock writer" because of the abnormality of the situations in his writing, which are treated humorously rather than with criticism for the actions of the characters.^[10] There is also some questioning of the necessity of the non-fiction factoids that appear in his novels, which is further used to make the "shock writer" argument. Many critics claim that Palahniuk's works are nihilistic, or explorations into nihilism. However, Palahniuk claims he is not a nihilist, but a romantic, and that his works are merely mistaken for being nihilistic because they express ideas that others do not believe in.^[11]

Other critics have claimed that they see elements of sexism in his writing.^[12] Much of this has fallen on the film adaptation of *Fight Club*, although the screenplay was not written

by Palahniuk himself. Still, there are those who claim his novels also contain sexist or chauvinistic statements.

Laura Miller of Salon.com wrote a scathing review of *Diary*^[13] prompting fans as well as Palahniuk himself to respond in Salon's *Letters* section.^[14]

Additionally, some literary critics including Miller argue that after *Fight Club* Palahniuk's novels have been too similar stylistically. For example, they argue that the narrators of *Fight Club*, *Choke* and *Survivor* all have very similar voices and writing styles, despite coming from radically different backgrounds (e.g., *Fight Club* is narrated by a worldly wise and cynical white-collar worker, but *Survivor* is narrated by the survivor of a death cult who had been raised in isolation). The common features of all three of these novels include the use of very short paragraphs and sentences, pop culture references, and cynical wisecracks about the status quo.

As Palahniuk's career continues, some critics have also accused him of using lurid subject matters simply because it is expected of him. In *The Onion's* review of *Haunted*, the reviewer wrote that gruesome scenes are "piled up to such extremes that it seems like Palahniuk is just double-daring himself to top each new vile degradation with something worse."^[15]

There are also some discrepancies regarding Palahniuk's science. For example, in *Survivor* he confuses terminal velocity for a person in free fall with the acceleration due to gravity. Whether these errors are intentional or not is debatable. Many of his novels are littered with urban legends, myths, and other falsehoods. For example, little of what the protagonist has to say about colonial history in *Choke* has any basis in reality, and he repeats old myths such as the one about the origin of "Ring Around the Rosie". However, another story told about a young man in colonial times convicted of bestiality with various farm animals is, in fact, true and can be found in the Journal of William Bradford.

Adaptations

Spoiler warning: *Plot and/or ending details follow.*



Fight Club DVD

Following the success of the movie of *Fight Club*, interest began to build in adapting *Survivor* to film. The film rights to *Survivor* were first sold in early 2001, but no movie

studio had committed itself to filming the novel. After the attacks on The Pentagon and World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, the movie studios apparently deemed the novel too controversial to film. This was due to the fact that the protagonist of *Survivor* hijacks a civilian airplane and crashes it into the Australian outback. However, in mid-2004 20th Century Fox decided to commit itself to adapting Palahniuk's novel. Palahniuk claims that the people who made the film *Constantine* will be working on this film.^[16] In the meantime, the film rights to *Invisible Monsters*, *Choke*, and *Diary* were also sold. While little is known about these projects, it is known that Jessica Biel was signed on to play the roles of both Shannon and Brandy in *Invisible Monsters*, which was supposed to begin filming in 2004 but as of 2005 has not begun production. Palahniuk has also mentioned that the film adaptation for *Choke* will be filmed by Darren Aronofsky, director of *Requiem for a Dream*, and his usual crew, although this has not been confirmed by any other source. David Fincher has expressed interest in filming *Diary* as an HBO miniseries.^[17]

Other than the film, *Fight Club* was also adapted into a fighting video game loosely based on the film, which was released in October 2004 to universally poor reviews. Palahniuk has mentioned at book readings that he is working on a musical based on *Fight Club* with David Fincher and Trent Reznor.^[18] Brad Pitt, who played the role of Tyler Durden in the film, has expressed interest in also being involved.

Graphic novel adaptations of *Invisible Monsters* and *Lullaby*, drawn by comic artist Kissgz, aka Gabor, are available online.

Fandom



Screenshot of www.chuckalahniuk.net

In 2003, members of Palahniuk's official web site made a documentary film about his life called *Postcards from the Future: The Chuck Palahniuk Documentary*. The official fan site, "The Cult" as the members call themselves, has initiated a writer's workshop where Chuck Palahniuk himself teaches the tricks of the trade. Every month Palahniuk puts up an essay on one of his writing methods, and answers questions about them later in the month. Palahniuk plans to compile all of these essays into a book on minimalist writing. Palahniuk also tries to answer every piece of fan mail sent to him. He sometimes sends odd gifts (such as plastic severed hands, prom tiaras, and masks) back with his responses. He also often gives these to fans at his book readings, sometimes as prizes for asking him questions. Along with signing fans' books at these readings, he also marks them with

humorous rubber stamps that relate to the books (for instance, a stamp of "Property of Dr. B. Alexander Sex Reassignment Clinic" in a copy of *Invisible Monsters*).

An English band named Fightstar re-named a song called "Out Swimming In The Flood" (due to the tsunami that happened during the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake) to "Palahniuk's Laughter". The band gave it this name because they thought Palahniuk's theory of canned laughter being recorded in the 1950s still being around today was an interesting subject.

All the members of the Nevada-based band Panic! At The Disco are fans of Palahniuk; in fact, three of the songs on their debut album, *A Fever You Can't Sweat Out*, are homages to the writer.

Awards

Palahniuk has won the following awards:

- the 1997 Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association Award (for *Fight Club*)
- the 1997 Oregon Book Award for Best Novel (for *Fight Club*)^[19]
- the 2003 Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association Award (for *Lullaby*)^[20]

He was also nominated for the 1999 Oregon Book Award for Best Novel for *Survivor* and the 2002 Bram Stoker Award for Best Novel for *Lullaby*.

Bibliography

Fiction

- *Insomnia: If You Lived Here, You'd Be Home Already* (early 1990s, unpublished)
- *Fight Club* (1996) — which was adapted into the film of the same name
- *Survivor* (1999)
- *Invisible Monsters* (1999)
- *Choke* (2001)
- *Lullaby* (2002)
- *Diary* (2003)
- *Haunted* (2005)
- *Rant* (to be released May 7, 2007)

Non-fiction

- *Fugitives and Refugees: A Walk in Portland, Oregon* (2003)
- *Stranger Than Fiction: True Stories* (2004)
- currently untitled book on minimalist writing (possibly in 2006)

See also

- List of novelists from the United States

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