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Chuck Palahniuk - Author of Fight Club

Chuck Palahniuk is one of those authors that never pulls punches. Instead of running away from chaos and uncomfortable things he explores, prods, and even embraces them. In a market where many authors dream about becoming an Oprah Book Club Book, Chuck writes with the hopes that men will pick up his books and find something that speaks to them. His books move forward at break neck speed with more twists and turns than a mountain road. It's no surprise that Fight Club translated so well onto the screen.



We sat down with Chuck in a little diner in Portland, Oregon. When we got there he was hard at work on the latest draft of his upcoming novel. Unassuming and soft spoken, Chuck isn't the kind of person you'd expect to create Fight Club's Tyler Durden or Invisible Monster's half-faced Evie. For the majority of our talk with Chuck Palahniuk we used questions submitted by DVD Talk members.

Warning: this interview contains spoilers, if you have not seen or read Fight Club be aware you may learn about some key plot twists.

What are you currently working on?

I'm writing a book called *Choke*. I figured if I could write a dark comedy about violence, I could write a really dark comedy about sex, so it's about sexually compulsive sexual addicts. The main protagonist is a sex junkie who goes to Sexaholics Anonymous to find partners, and he has all of these women going all of the time. He's constantly on the make.... That's just the tip of the iceberg.

What exactly IS the name of the main character in Fight Club, is his name Tyler, Jack, or something else?

His name was never given in the book. They needed a name for the screenplay to put next to the character's lines so they just put Jack in there for the hell of it. In the book at one point he even takes out his drivers license and shows it to Marla to prove that he's not Tyler Durden, but Marla was introduced to him under a dozen different names in the support groups. So when he finally comes to save her as Tyler, that's who she knows him as. All the people who have met him have met him as Tyler, so that's who they know him as. But his name is really.... I have no idea.

Support Groups play a strong roll in Fight Club. How did this come about and what's your experience been with them?

I used to work as a volunteer in a hospice, but I don't have any nursing skills or cooking skills or anything, so I was what they call an escort. I would take people to the support groups every night and I would have to sit sort of on the

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sidelines so I could take them back to hospice at the end of the meeting. I found myself sitting in group after group feeling really guilty about being the healthy person sitting there - "The Tourist". So I started thinking - What if someone just faked it? And just sat in these things for the intimacy and the honesty that they provide, the sort of cathartic emotional outlet. That's really how that whole idea came together.

What are your feelings about the movie version of Fight Club?

The first time I saw dailies of the movie was when I went down to the film's location, and David Fincher would drag me off the set to his trailer to show me dailies. He would be watching me for my reaction, and I had little or no idea where these scenes fit together. Here were these wonderful reaction shots and things like that which seemed so random, beautifully composed, attractive and funny in their own way, but I had no idea how they went together. I felt so self-conscious with David watching me. Now that I see the movie, especially when I sat down with Jim Uhls and record a commentary track for the DVD, I was sort of embarrassed of the book, because the movie had streamlined the plot and made it so much more effective and made connections that I had never thought to make. There is a line about "fathers setting up franchises with other families," and I never thought about connecting that with the fact that Fight Club was being franchised and the movie made that connection. I was just beating myself in the head for not having made that connection myself.

The movie reveals something about Tyler Durden much later than you do in the book. Which way do you feel was most effective and how did each one impact the story?

The actual realization was one of the parts of the movie that was the closest to the book, the process in which Tyler was revealed. It's almost word for word from the book, that scene in particular, and the telephone call to Marla. So I was very happy with that. It's funny, there was so much concern about whether or not people would accept the plot twist and David just kept on saying, "If they accept everything up to this point, they'll accept the plot twist. If they're still in the theater, they'll stay with it."

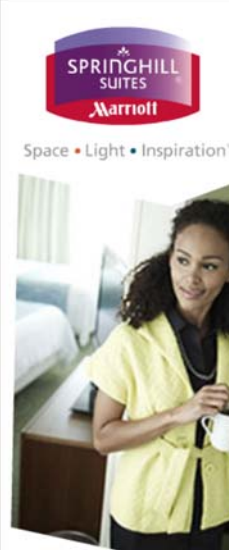
Being an author of a book that criticizes material possessions and having that book be wildly successful, does success challenge at all your original feelings about possessions?

Not really. It's sort of ironic, too, all of the things I dreamt about buying some day if I had money. Now that I have money I really don't have interest in things. I mean, look at me, all my clothes seem to look as if they come from Good Will, my house still sort of looks like hell. At this point I recognize the burden that things are, and so I really don't want a lot of things. In a big way I think, thank god I didn't have the money to buy all that stuff or I would be living with all that stuff. I'm really glad that up till that moment I never had the resources to make the kind of mistakes I would have been making.

There have been reports of real fight clubs popping up in various parts of the country. What are your feelings about that?

I hear BYU has enormous fight clubs with like 200 guys. People have been sending me newspaper articles on it about colleges trying to get them shut down. In a way I have to think that it has to be meeting a need. I train with a fighter three times a week in grappling, and I love it. It is the most fun thing I have done in years, and I look forward to it every time I go in, just fighting for two to three hours. If there wasn't a reward or big pay off, why the hell would people be doing it? It's not attractive and it's not something we'd think of as fun.

So was grappling something you did before writing



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the book?

No, just being angry was what I did before writing the book.

What was it like sitting down four years after your first published *Fight Club*, watching an interpretation of your work, and then having to talk about it on a commentary track?

It was spookier than that, because the work was an interpretation of the things my friends and I were actually doing at the time. Watching the DVD, it's like watching a movie version of my life, and seeing, if not myself, then at least all of my friends saying the things that they were saying at the time. The line, "We are the all singing, all dancing, crap of the world", was something that my friend Carston actually said. He was just learning English at the time and so he spoke in clichés like "all singing and all dancing". It's sort of spooky and surrealistic to see things that were real suddenly portrayed in this enormous Hollywood way.

Now wait a second. How much of this was based on real things?

Everything except for the clubs themselves.

Even Project Mayhem?

Project Mayhem was based on the Portland Cacophony Society, which I used to do more of. They get together and pull these enormous pranks. They're international now, almost every major city has a cacophony society and they pull huge pranks and jokes and stunts.

It was pretty amazing just how much dialogue in the movie was taken directly from the book. Were you surprised at how much they used from the book?

I had never been through this process before, so I just assumed that's the way they did it. So I can't say that I was really happy or really disappointed - I was glad. It's funny, I could pick out the lines that were not from the book, because there were so few lines that weren't from the book. The ones that were original to the movie were sort of jarring.

How do you react to critics like Roger Ebert who call *Fight Club* "Macho Porn"?

Oh really, he did? I haven't had a television for ten years, so I really don't keep up on all the review shows. "Macho Porn", I love that. It combines two of my favorite things, thank you, Roger... I heard that Rex Reed said that nasty thing that "maybe this film will find its audience in hell..." I'm going to have to look him up in hell and buy him a drink some day.

There seems to be a very small segment of literature oriented to men, very few books talk about the male experience, or explore what it is to be a guy. *Fight Club* is a quintessential exploration of being a guy living in the late twentieth century.

I was told that 85% of all fiction sells to older middle-age woman. 85%, my God! I just felt like I was really cutting my throat to write a book that wasn't about an older middle-age woman to fall in love. Somehow I knew there wouldn't be a market for it, but what else am I going to write. I think it's more important to write something that brings men back to reading than it is to write for people who already read. There's a reason men don't read, and it's because books don't serve men. It's time we produce books that serve men.

What is the one thing you truly want people to get out of *Fight Club* and your other books?

That we need to be more comfortable and more accepting of chaos, and things that we see as disastrous. Because it is only through those things we can be redeemed and change. We should welcome disaster, we should welcome things that we generally run away from. There is a redemption

available in those things that is available nowhere else.

The plots in your books take a lot of twists and turns, especially Invisible Monsters. Would you consider this a part of your style or just something present in the books you've written so far?

So much of what I do is a reaction to what I don't like about books. One thing I don't care for, that really angered me, was fiction that just plodded along, and would spend a whole chapter discussing the color of an orange or someone waiting for their tea to cool enough that they could drink it. I was like, "screw this", I wanted fiction based on verbs, rather than a fiction based on adjectives. I get into enough description as I can to get by, but I really think that's the reader's privilege to fill in the blanks and I'll handle the verbs. Sometimes, like in Invisible Monsters, I get too out of control and instead of a plot point every chapter I want a plot point in every sentence.

In Fight Club I used the bomb recipes, because so much cute fiction was being written with food recipes in it, like Nora Ephron's Heartburn, Like Water For Chocolate. It got to be so you couldn't pick up a novel anymore without feeling like you were reading a cookbook. So I thought, why not a novel with like, guy recipes. So that's why I started doing that.

How to make Napalm with Frozen Orange Juice and Gasoline?

Well, Ed Norton changed one ingredient in every one to make them useless. So, that really pissed me off because I really research those really well. Actually its styrofoam and gasoline - it make the most incredible explosive.

If they ever make Invisible Monsters into a movie, who would you most like to see cast in it?

It's funny, because even now I can't get Helena Bonham Carter out of my head. She is such an exceptionally attractive person and also I felt the kind of actor that Edward Norton is. She's aware of even the tinniest gesture and how she appears. Maybe it's just that I'm sort of fixated on her after Fight Club, but Helena Bonham Carter is just, I think, probably the most extraordinary actress possibly of our generation. I can't think of anybody I'd rather see.

I love that moment in Fight Club where she takes that puff of smoke and time seems suspended.

The French inhale thing, and the subsonic sound that David puts in on top of that. It was so perfectly Marla. It was really sweet to take my friend who Marla was based on and introduce her.

What's the current status of Survivor as a movie?

It's in pre-production at Twentieth Century Fox. Gwyneth Paltro's brother Jake got the contract to write the screenplay. He's Steven Spielberg's protégé right now. He did a really fantastic screenplay about a robot that falls in love, and it was just about to go into production when Bicentennial Man with Robin Williams came out. It killed the whole project. In the shadow of that the whole thing just died, no matter how good it was. He's under contract to do the screenplay; apparently he really loves the book. It's not really until a screenplay is done that they can get the actors and directors under contract. They've mentioned Jim Carrey and Jerry Bruckheimer. They've talked about doing it more along the lines of a big action excitement spectacular movie.

Wow, doesn't all this Hollywood attention just blow you away?

I am always so terrified about the next thing that I don't have a lot of energy to put in. I hope for their sake that they do a good job, because I want them to make money. I want them to be happy with their product. To tell you the truth I am so worried about my next project, that's where I am.

Are you on track to be doing a book every year?

Boy that sounds like a treadmill, doesn't it. Not necessarily a book a year. Right now I am working on *Choke* for next year. I am doing a lot of magazine work. *Playboy* just published a chapter from *Choke* as a short story in this month's issue. I have another chapter from *Choke* coming out in the Christmas *Playboy* in December.

It's such a small place to work in, writing a story for Playboy. Talk about making every word count.

That's what's nice about short stories, it trains you to make a lot happen in seven pages. It's a perfect framing to write a real action-filled novel. Whatever happens has to happen in so many numbers of pages to keep the plot going. I love that about short stories.

If you were asked to pen a screenplay for one of your novels, would you be interested in doing it?

I would love to try it just because now that I do this full time, I am afraid that it is going to get boring - "Oh, time to crank out another one". I did do one screenplay thinking that they'd be really easy. All you do is get that screenplay software and boom. It's only 113 pages, and I could knock that out in a weekend. And I did one and it was terrible, it was absolutely awful. My agent declined to present it to anyone and I realized that there's a lot more to this. It's going to take some real training and real studying to learn how to get it down.

You really have the gift for dialogue and narration. I'd think that could translate well into screenplays.

In books you can just wallow in dialogue and you can just wallow in written words. In screenplays every line has to serve the purpose of the line that's implied before it and the line that's implied after it. Maybe five lines have to do the work of fifty lines. So much more has to be implied, has to occur in the viewer's mind so that everything isn't sort of expository and explained to the viewer, and that's a skill I am trying to develop.

There must be increasing pressure related to your success, now you've got one book that has been made into a movie, another in pre-production. How do you deal with the pressure?

I seem to be productive enough that I don't perceive a lot of the pressure; I am sort of a workaholic also. Additionally I've been going off and doing some interesting magazine pieces. I just got back from living a week on the USS Louisiana, this nuclear submarine down in Florida for Nest Magazine, a design and living magazine. They wanted to see how people lived on submarines. So I get to do these very cool guy things I've always wanted to do.

Who has influenced you in your writing?

Tom Jones, the Seattle writer, Amy Hemple, she's a short story writer from New York, she lives in the Bay Area some times. Amy Hemple is incredible. Joan Didieon's essays. It's funny, so much of my fiction is so much like essays, sometimes I'll drop the plot altogether and I'll do a chapter that just sort of discusses something, like the Stairmaster chapter in *Survivor* - it's just a long rant on the nature of modern life and trying to achieve epiphanies within really limited time windows. I love to read essays, because I write so much like essays. I really like Bret Ellis' collection, *The Informers*. It's his only collection of short stories. I really loved *American Psycho*. I couldn't believe what a good job they did with the movie of that book. I really loved that movie - it really made me want to go back and re-read the book.

Many people put both *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* into the same category of fiction that crosses the boundaries of what many people may consider 'acceptable'. How do respond to that?

I find it important to give myself license to write without apologies. You wouldn't believe how many single mothers I've had come up and want to pick a fight over the line "What you see in Fight Club is a generation of men raised by women." Single mothers are so angry and offended by that line. They are even more angry about that line than they are about Marla's abortion line. You have to give yourself license to put things in that might be inflammatory, permission not to have to please everybody. If you try to please everybody you won't please anyone.

What role has the Internet played in your writing?

To tell a really horrible secret, when I was researching Invisible Monsters, I didn't know anything about transgender hormone treatments. So I would get into transgender bulletin boards and chat rooms explaining that I had illegally obtained female hormones to begin self medicating myself and I needed to know about dosages and side effects and what to use and what to stack for different hormonal effects, different treatments periods, all the details about dose per weight and stuff, and how big my breasts would get and everything like that. All these very caring, very nurturing transgender people were e-mailing me constantly for months. Well, OK, they were e-mailing a person named Cherry at my e-mail address - "How's it going Cherry Girl, how's your breasts? Are you doing good?" My housemates kept coming across these e-mails and they were not happy. They kept on saying, "This isn't a nice thing. Cherry needs to die". Eventually Cherry had a really bad car accident and never ever responded to e-mails again. The whole experience really helped give the whole issue of transgender a face, it made them into real people, instead of stereotypes or dirty jokes.

For Choke I've been going to Sexaholic's Anonymous meetings, because it makes those people again into human beings, rather than just being perverts or nymphos. I can't make fun of them, I can't hurt them, because I see them too much as these human beings. In a way it's great research, but it's also a real safety on my part to keep from ever finding fun at their expense.

It'll be really interesting when you release Choke as you'll have a book with strong violence themes and one with strong sex themes. It seems that people tend to be more up in arms over sex in movies than violence.

Really? I thought it was violence that wasn't okay, and sex was great. Boy, after Fight Club I thought, I'm never doing violence again.

Are you surprised that Fight Club didn't have more problems with the MPAA?

It's funny, a little inside thing about Fight Club, and I won't tell you whether or not it's true - I heard that the only way that David got an "R" for Fight Club was that he screened it without the impact sounds in the fight scenes, so you didn't have those really gruesome meat packing sounds in the fight scenes. Apparently without those sounds those scenes are much more stagy and artificial looking. Once it went into distribution those sounds may have somehow found their way back in. They cut a lot thought to avoid an "NC-17".

The studio was all over David about that abortion line, they begged him to take it out and at the last minute he said okay, and they gave him carte blanche to change it to anything. After they saw it with the new line, they hated it even more and begged him to change it back. So David wins. I thought David's line was even more effective because you needed a laugh at that point to break the tension after all the sex was portrayed, and David's line gets a laugh whereas my line just gets a shock. David's line is much better and more appropriate.

Considering your books have a number of more extreme themes, have you encountered pushback or resistance from your publisher and editor on what

should and shouldn't be in your books?

That's what I really trust about Gerry, my editor for Fight Club, Survivor and now Choke. Gerry will let a lot of things go through, but he pulls me back on some things that, when I look at them in retrospect, I'm so glad he pulled me back. In the original draft of Fight Club they did castrate the police chief. There was a freezer full of bagged testicles in the Paper Street house, and Gerry said, "No, that's just going to lose too much sympathy. Don't have them do that." So I pulled back there and I am so glad I did.

How did you first get your break in writing, and what were you doing before writing Fight Club?

I worked at Freightliner for thirteen years right after college. I worked on the assembly line for several years. Then I moved into working as sort of a research mechanic, I would do repair and vehicle modification procedures and then write about them. So I worked on trucks and wrote about them. Fight Club had its genesis while I was working at Freightliner. I had been on vacation and I had gotten into a really terrible fight. When I came back on Monday from vacation, I was just so wiped out. Nobody would acknowledge just how terrible I looked, because it seemed nobody wanted to know what I did in my spare time. I thought that if you looked bad enough, you could do anything because nobody will ever call you on it. It was that day I started writing the Fight Club.

Chuck Palahniuk's Books:[Fight Club](#)[Invisible Monsters](#)[Survivor : A Novel](#)**Also Purchase:**[Fight Club DVD](#)

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