FIGHT CLUB
Wilmington, Delaware / Long Beach, CA
1999 – Present

(immediately following)
New York Times

(midway)
Los Angeles Times

FILM

Opening This Week

BEEFCAKE — Thom Fitzgerald's mix of drama and documentary evokes the now-campy world of men's "physique" magazines of the 1950's. With Bob Mizer as a meek guy who aspires to look more manly. (No rating) (1:33) Film Forum, 209 Houston St. (727-8110) Opens Wed., through Nov. 2.

THE BOYS — Set in Sydney, Australia, Rowan Woods's drama is based on Gordon Graham's play about a disturbed man (David Wenham) returning from a year in jail and inflicting his doubts and paranoia on his sprawling extended family. With Toni Colette, Anthony Hayes, John Polson and Lynette Curran. (No rating) (1:26) Cinema Village, 22 E. 12th St. (924-3364) Opens Fri.

CREMASTER 2 — The fourth in an eccentrically-numbered series, this surreal drama by the performance artist Matthew Barney is loosely based on the 1977 execution of Gary Gilmore (Mr. Barney) who is pursuing Harry Houdini (Norman Mailer) into the afterlife. (No rating) (1:19) Film Forum, 209 Houston St. (727-8110) Opens Wed.

FEVER PITCH — A romantic comedy, directed by David Evans and adapted by Nick Hornby from his novel, about a British sports fanatic (Colin Firth) and an uptight professional woman (Ruth Gemmell) trying to balance their relationship against the demands of the soccer season. (No rating) (1:37) Village East, Second Ave. at 12th St. (529-6799) Opens Fri.

FIGHT CLUB — David Fincher's dark drama is about the underworld of men's sparring clubs. Based on a novel by Chuck Palahniuk, it stars Brad Pitt as a fight club aficionado and Edward Norton as the fascinated neophyte who gets in over his head. (R) (2:20) Opens Fri.

A GIRL CALLED ROSEMARIE — Based on a true story, Bernd Eichinger's drama, set in Germany during the 1950's, follows the fortunes of a lovely, ambitious young woman (Nina Hoss) who gets involved in political intrigue, prostitution and romance. In German, with subtitles. (No rating) (2:07) Quad Cinema, 13th St., west of Fifth Ave. (255-8800) Opens Fri.

JOE THE KING — Winner of the screenwriting award at this year's Sundance Film Festival, Frank Whaley's film stars Ethan Hawke, Val Kilmer, Camryn Manheim, Austin Pendleton and John Leguizamo in a story about a 14-year-old (Noah Fleiss) grappling with his alcoholic father, his overwhelmed mother and poverty; it seems a life of crime might be his only ticket out. (R) (1:33) Opens Fri.

SAME OLD SONG — Alain Resnais's musical comedy uses old recordings to examine the intricate lives of a small group of Parisian friends as they negotiate their relationships. When it was shown at last year's New York Film Festival, Stephen Holden called the movie "buoyant" and wrote that it "skips along merrily. What does it all add up to? Not a whole lot. Yet by the end of the film you've become more than superficially acquainted with six recognizable and complicated individuals. How many movie musicals can make that claim?" In French, with subtitles. (No rating) (2:00) Lincoln Plaza, Bway at 63d St. (757-2280) Opens Fri.

SHOW ME LOVE — Alexandra Dahlstrom and Rebecca Liljeberg star in Lukas Moodysson's drama about Swedish high school girls who stumble into the wrong party, come out of the closet and fall in love. In Swedish, with subtitles. (No rating) (1:29) Opens Fri.

THE STORY OF US — A 15-year-old marriage starts to strain at the seams in Rob Reiner's romantic comedy, with Bruce Willis and Michelle Pfeiffer as the disillusioned couple. (R) Opens Fri.

THE STRAIGHT STORY — David Lynch's drama, based on the true story of Alvin Straight, is about an elderly man (Richard Farnsworth) who wants to visit his ailing brother (Harry Dean Stanton). To get there, he rides his lawn mower 260 miles from Iowa to Wisconsin. (G) Opens Fri. *A related article is on page 13.*

THAT'S THE WAY I LIKE IT — In 1977 Singapore, a bored young man in a dead-end job (Adrian Pang) dreams of being able to afford a snappy new motorbike. Hoping to win the lucrative first prize, he enters a disco dance competition. Glen Goei wrote and directed the romantic comedy, which also features Madeline Tan as his dance-lesson partner and Pierre Png, Anna Belle Francis and Steven Lim as his aimless friends. (PG-13) (1:55) Opens Fri.

ON THE WEB

Reviews of current movies and theater along with listings of music, dance and art are available from The New York Times on the Web:

www.nytimes.com

Additional previews of coming events and reviews, with New York area show times, are available on New York Today:

www.nytoday.com

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Brooke Williams/Trimark Pictures

Noah Fleiss stars as Joe Henry in "Joe the King," a drama written and directed by Frank Whaley about a 14-year-old's bleak life with his alcoholic father (Val Kilmer) and the temptations of a life of crime.

Recent Openings

THE ADVENTURES OF ELMO IN GROUCHLAND — Gary Halvorsen's musical stars little red Elmo from Sesame Street who loses his treasured blue blanket, and manages to find it again in the Grouch's trash can in a dump owned by the villainous Huxley (Mandy Patinkin). It "gets off to an enchanting start. The film offers lessons about co-operation, perserverance and transformation, and they're well-handled. But the somewhat complicated plot may disappoint or confuse some tiny Elmo fans" (Anita Gates). (G) (1:30)

DRIVE ME CRAZY — Based on the novel "How I Created My Perfect Prom Date" by Todd Strasser, John Schultz's romantic comedy stars Melissa Joan Hart and Adrian Grenier as next-door-neighbors with little in common who suddenly discover each other after she plays Pygmalion and gives him a makeover. "As teen-age romantic comedies go, [this] ranks among the easy to take. When it comes to an ending, [it] offers no surprises, but it arrives there in amiable, sensible style" (Lawrence Van Gelder). (PG-13) (1:33)

HAPPY, TEXAS — Escaped prisoners (Jeremy Northam and Steve Zahn) pretend to be gay beauty pageant directors to evade recapture, but wind up in the clutches of the town's most eligible women (Ally Walker and Illeana Douglas). Mark Illsley directed the comedy. It's a "risk-free satire. Almost everybody in this not-so-funny comedy is giddy and cuddlesome with a gosh-oh-gee enthusiasm that is at first engaging, but quickly becomes a sign of a desperation to be liked" (Stephen Holden). (PG-13) (1:36)

MYSTERY, ALASKA — A publicity stunt pitches a small Alaskan community hockey team against the New York Rangers. Jay Roach directed the drama, which stars Russell Crowe as an amateur ice hockey talent, Burt Reynolds as a marketer for the National Hockey League and Hank Azaria as a journalist. The film is "an upbeat meat-and-potatoes movie that . . . conveys some of the thrill and ferocity of ice hockey while skillfully folding togther multiple personal dramas" (Holden). (R) (1:58)

NEW ROSE HOTEL — Abel Ferrara's film, set in the computerized future where huge corporations use lethal force to seek out betrayal by spies, stars Willem Dafoe, Christopher Walken, Asia Argento and Annabella Sciorra and is based on a short story by William Gibson. "Mr. Ferrara's work hews firmly to its own ideas of purity. He continues to encourage stony leading men toward remarkable feats of self-flagellation, and to have faith in the ability of kinky eroticism to settle most situations" (Janet Maslin). (R) (1:33) Cinema Village, 22 E. 12th St. (924-3364)

PLUNKETT AND MacLEANE — Robert Carlyle and Jonny Lee Miller portray 18th-century highwaymen, an odd couple with the lower-class one providing the know-how and the upper-class one one providing the social connections. Jake Scott's adventure also stars Liv Tyler, Michael Gambon, Alan Cumming and Claire Rushbrook. "This frenziedly over-directed hybrid of a buddy movie and a costume drama could be described as a Hogarthian panorama of depravity and treachery set to a late-90's disco beat" (Holden). (R) (1:42)

THREE KINGS — David O. Russell's satire is about Operation Desert Storm soldiers who go looking for a Kuwaiti treasure that they believe has been looted by the Iraqui invaders. With George Clooney, Ice Cube, Mark Wahlberg. "The Pandora's box of camera tricks that is opened here must surely have been intended to capture the speed and disorientation of wartime experience, and the jittery atmosphere in which soldier's snap judgments are made. But it takes a sure hand to know when to eliminate the superfluous and let a story unfold on its own terms" (Maslin). (R) (1:45)

Film Series

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE — "*Projecting Desire: The Films of Pedro Almodóvar.*" Today, 2: "Labyrinth of Passion" (1982); at 4: "Live Flesh" (1997). Sat., 2: "Matador" (1985); at 4:30: "The Flower of My Secret" (1996). Ends next Sun., 2: "Dark Habits" (1983); at 4:30: "Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!" (1989). 35th Ave. at 36th St., Astoria, Queens. (718-784-0077)

BAM ROSE CINEMAS — "*BAM Cinématek.*" Mon.: Capra's "Matinee Idol" (1928) and "Rain or Shine" (1930). Tues.: Ruiz's "Life is a Dream" (1986). Wed.: Lang's "M" (1931). Thur.: Godard's "Contempt" (1963). Brooklyn Academy of Music, 30 Lafayette Ave., Bklyn. (718-623-2770)

FILM FORUM — "*Carl Theodor Dreyer: Tribute to the Great Danish Director.*" Starts Wed.: Jensen's "Carl Theodor Dreyer: My Métier" (1996) and Dreyer's "Parson's Widow" (1920). Thur.-Fri.: Dreyer's "Vampyr" (1932). Fri.-next Sun.: Dreyer's "Passion of Joan of Arc" (1928). Sat.-next Sun.: Dreyer's "Ordet" (1955). Through Oct. 19. 209 W. Houston St. (727-8110)

FILM SOCIETY OF LINCOLN CENTER — "*An Unfolding Horizon: The Films of Hou Hsiao-Hsien.*" Starts Wed., through Oct. 27. This week: "The Puppetmaster" (1993), "Flowers of Shanghai" (1998), "Summer at Grandpa's" (1984), "The Boys from Fengkuei" (1983), "Goodbye, South, Goodbye" (1996), "Daughter of the Nile" (1987), "A Time to Live, A Time to Die" (1985) and "A City of Sadness" (1989). Walter Reade Theater, 165 W. 65th St. (875-5600)

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART — "*From Automatic Vaudeville to the Seventh Art: Cinema's Silent Years, 1893-1928.*" This week: West's "Female of the Species" (1916), Niblo's "Blood and Sand" (1922), Griffith's "Intolerance" (1916) and "True Heart Susie" (1919), shorts by Charlie Chaplin, Ford's "Iron Horse" (1924), Donehue's "Trip to Bountiful" (1953), King's "Seventh Day" (1922), Rippert's "Homunculus, Chapter 4: The Revenge of Homunculus" (1916), Newmeyer's "Grandma's Boy" (1922), Hart's "Taking of Luke McVane" (1915) and Smith's "Wild Bill Hickok" (1923). Through March 11 W. 53d St. (708-9480)

OCULARIS at GALAPAGOS ARTS AND PERFORMANCE SPACE — "*Perspective Canada — The Canadian Film Series.*" Today: Egoyan's "Exotica" (1994) with Murphy's "Feeler" (1995). Mon.: Lauzon's "Leolo" (1992) with Carriere's "Sway" (1998). Sundays and Mondays through Oct. 31. 70 N. 6th St, between Wythe and Kent, Williamsburg, Bklyn (718-388-8713)

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART — "*The Cool World: American Film and Video 1950-2000.*" Today, noon: "The Beats 1," shorts by Brakhage, Jordan, Heliczer, Jacobs and Fleischner; at 2: shorts by Berman, Pike, Paine, Leslie and Vigne; at 4: shorts by Frank and Leslie, Balch and Weiss. Thur., 6: "Early Independents 3: Drew's "Primary" (1960). Sat., noon: "Dancing and the Streets," shorts by Broughton, Clarke, Emshwiller and Deren; at 2: "In the Cities," shorts by Thompson, Peterson, Stauffacher, Klein and Clarke; at 4: "In the Streets," shorts by Burckhardt, Jacobs, Cornell and Burckhardt, Jordan, Pennebaker and Levitt, Loeb and Agee. 945 Madison Ave., at 75th St. (570-3676).

Y.W.C.A. CINE-CLUB — "*Jean-Luc Godard at the Y.W.C.A.*" Weekends at 4 through Dec. 12. Today: "Every Man for Himself" (1980). Sat.: "Weekend" (1967). 610 Lexington Ave., at 53d St. (735-6717)

Fox Drops Film Ads From Trade Paper
By BERNARD WEINRAUB
New York Times (1923-Current file); Oct 13, 1999;
ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2006)
pg. C18

Fox Drops Film Ads From Trade Paper

By BERNARD WEINRAUB

HOLLYWOOD, Oct. 12 — 20th Century Fox has dropped its film advertising with The Hollywood Reporter because of the newspaper's negative comments about the coming film, "Fight Club."

A Fox executive said the decision could mean the loss of hundreds of thousands of dollars to the trade newspaper, which is widely read in the entertainment business. The coming Academy Awards campaign, in which studios advertise heavily in the two trade papers, is a prime source of revenue for The Hollywood Reporter and its rival, Variety.

"At this point the film studio is not advertising in The Hollywood Reporter," the executive said.

Robert Dowling, publisher of The Hollywood Reporter, declined to respond to phone calls.

The decision was prompted by a series of negative articles about "Fight Club," which opens Friday. The film, which stars Brad Pitt and Edward Norton, is a violent exploration of men frustrated with their lives who join a fight club and pummel one another.

Anita M. Busch, the editor of The Hollywood Reporter, in a column today, denounced the violence in the Fox film and said it "has drawn more gut anger from the industry than I've ever heard."

Such a Very Long Way From Duvets to Danger
By JANET MASLIN
New York Times (1923-Current file); Oct 15, 1999;
ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2006)
pg. E14

FILM REVIEW

Such a Very Long Way From Duvets to Danger

By JANET MASLIN

Of the two current films in which buttoned-down businessmen rebel against middle-class notions of masculinity, David Fincher's savage "Fight Club" is by far the more visionary and disturbing. Where "American Beauty" hinges on the subversive allure of a rose-covered blond cheerleader, Mr. Fincher has something a good deal tougher in mind. The director of "Seven" and "The Game" for the first time finds subject matter audacious enough to suit his lightning-fast visual sophistication, and puts that style to stunningly effective use. Lurid sensationalism and computer gamesmanship left this filmmaker's earlier work looking hollow and manipulative. But the sardonic, testosterone-fueled science fiction of "Fight Club" touches a raw nerve.

In a film as strange and single-mindedly conceived as "Eyes Wide Shut," Mr. Fincher's angry, diffidently witty ideas about contemporary manhood unfold. As based on a novel by Chuck Palahniuk (and deftly written by Jim Uhls), it builds a huge, phantasmagorical structure around the search for lost masculine authority, and attempts to psychoanalyze an entire society in the process. Complete with an even bigger narrative whammy than the one that ends "The Sixth Sense," this film twists and turns in ways that only add up fully on the way out of the theater and might just require another viewing. Mr. Fincher uses his huge arsenal of tricks to bury little hints at what this story is really about.

"Fight Club" has two central figures, the milquetoast narrator played by Edward Norton and his charismatic, raging crony played by Brad Pitt. The narrator has been driven to the edge of his sanity by a dull white-collar job, an empty fondness for material things ("I'd flip through catalogues and wonder what kind of dining set defined me as a person") and the utter absence of anything to make him feel alive. Tormented by insomnia, he finds his only relief in going to meetings of 12-step support groups, where he can at least cry. The film hurtles along so smoothly that its meaningfully bizarre touches, like Meat Loaf Aday as a testicular cancer patient with very large breasts, aren't jarring at all.

Merrick Morton/20th Century Fox
Brad Pitt, center, in "Fight Club," which was directed by David Fincher.

The narrator finds a fellow 12-step addict in Marla, played with witchy sensuality by Helena Bonham Carter and described by the script as "the little scratch on the roof of your mouth that would heal if only you could stop tonguing it — but you can't." As that suggests, Marla's grunge recklessness makes a big impression on the film's narrator, and can mostly be blamed for setting the story in motion. Soon after meeting her he is on an airplane, craving any sensation but antiseptic boredom, and he meets Mr. Pitt's Tyler Durden in the next seat. Surveying the bourgeois wimp he nicknames Ikea Boy, Tyler asks all the hard questions. Like: "Why do guys like you and I know what a duvet is?"

Mr. Norton, drawn into Tyler's spell, soon forsakes his tidy ways and moves into the abandoned wreck that is ground central for Tyler. Then Tyler teaches his new roommate to fight in a nearby parking lot. The tacitly homoerotic bouts between these two men become addictive (as does sex with Marla), and their fight group expands into a secret society, all of which the film presents with the curious matter-of-factness of a dream. Somehow nobody gets hurt badly, but the fights leave frustrated, otherwise emasculated men with secret badges of not-quite-honor.

"Fight Club" watches this form of escapism morph into something much more dangerous. Tyler somehow builds a bridge from the anti-materialist rhetoric of the 1960's ("It's only after we've lost everything that we're free to do anything") into the kind of paramilitary dream project that Ayn Rand might have admired. The group's rigorous training and subversive agenda are as deeply disturbing to Mr. Norton's mild-mannered character as Tyler's original wild streak was thrilling. But even when acts of terrorism are in the offing, he can't seem to tear himself away.

Like Kevin Smith's "Dogma," "Fight Club" sounds offensive from afar. If watched sufficiently mindlessly, it might be mistaken for a dangerous endorsement of totalitarian tactics and super-violent nihilism in an all-out assault on society. But this is a much less gruesome film than "Seven" and a notably more serious one. It means to explore the lure of violence in an even more dangerously regimented, dehumanized culture. That's a hard thing to illustrate this powerfully without, so to speak, stepping on a few toes.

In an expertly shot and edited film spiked with clever computer-generated surprises, Mr. Fincher also benefits, of course, from marquee appeal. The teamwork of Mr. Norton and Mr. Pitt is as provocative and complex as it's meant to be. Mr. Norton, an ingenious actor, is once again trickier than he looks. Mr. Pitt struts through the film with rekindled brio and a visceral sense of purpose. He's right at home in a movie that warns against worshiping false idols.

"Fight Club" is rated R (Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian). It includes bloody fights, grisly touches, sexual situations and nudity, profanity and assorted intentional gross-out shocks, including the rendering of human fat into soap.

FIGHT CLUB

Directed by David Fincher; written by Jim Uhls, based on the novel "Fight Club," by Chuck Palahniuk; director of photography, Jeff Cronenweth; edited by James Haygood; music by the Dust Brothers; production designer, Alex McDowell; produced by Art Linson, Cean Chaffin and Ross Grayson Bell; released by Fox 2000 Pictures. Running time: 135 minutes. This film is rated R.

WITH: Brad Pitt (Tyler Durden), Edward Norton (Narrator), Helena Bonham Carter (Marla Singer), Robert (Meat Loaf Aday) and Jared Leto (Angel Face).

Finding Spiritual Rebirth In a Valley of Male Ennui
By BILL DESOWITZ
New York Times (1923-Current file); Dec 12, 1999;
ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2006)
pg. AR15

FILM

Finding Spiritual Rebirth In a Valley of Male Ennui

Lorey Sebastian/Dreamworks Pictures

Fighting against the existential angst underlying late-90's prosperity: Kevin Spacey, in "American Beauty," realizes (too late) Alan Ball's Buddhist vision of "the miraculous in the mundane."

Merrick Morton/20th Century Fox

Brad Pitt, above, helps a lost soul build a new identity in "Fight Club" and Tom Cruise, in "Magnolia," plays a sexual predator who finds healing

By BILL DESOWITZ

WELL, at least the movies are approaching the end of the millennium with a bang, which is more than you can say for the rest of us, the real-life inhabitants of this disconnected fin de siècle. But we still might turn things around if we heed the warnings of "American Beauty," "Fight Club," "Bringing Out the Dead" and "Magnolia" (opening Friday). On one hand, these are films about male rage, regret and reconciliation. But they're also like shock treatment, trying to stir all of us — both men and women — into leading more meaningful lives as we enter the 21st century.

Talk about eyes wide shut; these films are dedicated to the notion of busting up the numbing-down of society. Armed with gallows humor and the postfeminist mantra of male empowerment, they express the pain and anger felt by lost and lonely men and boys who are starting to fight back. But they also attack much larger targets: everyone's yearning for human contact and spiritual renewal that lies under these deceptively prosperous times. It's about time, too. After toying with our adolescent fantasies for so long, the movies are finally confronting our existential angst — the real Y2K bug.

In "American Beauty," Kevin Spacey sarcastically describes his dismal suburban existence and life-affirming revelation from beyond the boomer grave. Better late than never. Edward Norton does him one better in "Fight Club." This sleepwalking Gen X member tells his twisted tale of sadomasochism and consumer revolt with even greater sarcasm and urgency. Nicolas Cage, meanwhile, sees ghosts in "Bringing Out the Dead." He's a scorched paramedic, a "grief mop," acerbically recounting how his prolonged losing streak has squashed his spirit in Hell's Kitchen, where compassion collides with indifference. It all comes to a boil in "Magnolia," where a Los Angeles suburb collectively seems to plead for compassion and forgiveness. "I have lots of love to give!" groans William H. Macy, who plays a former quiz kid, struck by lightning, who had never lived up to his promise.

Guys pump iron and beat each other up in a fin de siècle quest for meaning.

You can tell the end of the millennium is near by the four films' preoccupation with death and rebirth (Mr. Norton even utters those last three words early on in "Fight Club"). That's why the writers' insistence on voice-over works. It adds a sense of intimacy and perspective that pushes us beyond a transitory present to a redemptive future. And in each case, redemption is linked to overcoming the fear of death. It's the only way to attain maturity, these films suggest. They admonish us to rebuild ourselves from the ground up, stripping away the dehumanizing technological toys and psychological baggage and starting all over again in the image of Buddha, Freud and Jesus.

ALTHOUGH everyone likes to equate Sam Mendes's "American Beauty" with "Sunset Boulevard," a more apt comparison is Thornton Wilder's play "Our Town," with its ode to the eternal human spirit. There's a bit of Wilder's Emily in Mr. Spacey's Lester: a postmodern muddle of a man who doesn't recognize life's everyday magic until the end. Indeed, the screenwriter Alan Ball has said in an interview that he was inspired by the Buddhist notion of the "miraculous within the mundane." Unlike Wes Bentley, who plays the spiritually alert boy next door, Mr. Spacey remains comfortably numb until he fixes his lascivious gaze on the sultry teenage cheerleader played by Mena Suvari.

Then she becomes his catalyst, igniting his dormant passion, playing tricks with his imagination, inducing visions of her naked body amid floating rose petals. So the inspired Mr. Spacey goes from being a white-collar drone to a giddy free spirit: blackmailing his boss, quitting his job, pumping iron, playing with toys, hanging out with teenagers and fantasizing about his gorgeous goddess. But it's a wrong-headed journey that leads to arrested adolescence. He has missing the essential truth by focusing on the misleading surface.

That's where the dancing plastic bag comes in, the film's metaphor for truth and beauty, which Mr. Bentley captures on video. It's the young

Continued on Page 35

Bill Desowitz's most recent article for Arts & Leisure was about the film "A Matter of Life and Death."

Spiritual Rebirth Amid Male Ennui

Continued From Page 15

man's epiphany, his salvation from the abusive horrors of his home. The grace and wonder of the bag are a marvel to behold. It's like glimpsing life itself, free but ephemeral. Yet there's something eternal about its spirit that's intended to be passed on from person to person.

For Mr. Spacey, the true epiphany comes only when he discovers that his sex goddess is not what she seems. Her vulnerability touches him, and she reminds him of his estranged daughter (Thora Birch), the person he has been trying to reach all along. (He has basically given up on his wife, Annette Bening, who's incapable even of messing around on the sofa for fear of messing it up.) He realizes that consummating his fantasy would be like raping his daughter. He suddenly grows up, no longer the man-child afraid of adulthood.

But no good deed goes unpunished here. Like Emily in the Thornton Wilder play, his painful price for wisdom is death. He must now observe everyone else playing the game of life from a blissful distance, knowing that its miracles should not be taken for granted. A precious few, like Mr. Bentley, are fortunate to appreciate every breathing moment. The rest, like the shrill Ms. Bening or Mr. Bentley's catatonic mother (Allison Janney) and embittered father (Chris Cooper), never get it. That's why Mr. Spacey's parting remarks about getting it now or later are aimed at us.

However, what Mr. Spacey says about never underestimating the power of denial best describes Mr. Norton's quandary in "Fight Club." He's worse off than Mr. Spacey: a schizophrenic insomniac, a prisoner of planet Ikea, in need of nurturing and mentoring. So is everyone in this polarizing film. It simultaneously evokes the spirit of Susan Faludi and Robert Bly. Only men don't run into the woods for a good cathartic cry; they beat each other to a pulp.

It's the perfect metaphor for vanquishing male anguish. It's so primal. And so misunderstood. But, then, the director, David Fincher, has been misunderstood ever since "Seven." He is neither a nihilist nor a fascist; he is a morbid moralist in the grand tradition of the Brothers Grimm, delineating dark, subterranean rites of passage.

HIS last three films are all about awakenings: "Seven" is a Bible-thumping parable in which a burned-out detective, Morgan Freeman, is jolted into into battling evil once again; "The Game" is an outrageous version of "A Christmas Carol," with wicked Michael Douglas going to hell and back and becoming a kinder person, and "Fight Club" is a nasty "Jekyll and Hyde" riff, in which Mr. Norton purges himself of his existential funk by getting it on with his dark side. Freud would be proud.

Needing a mentor, Mr. Norton finds one, or creates one, in Brad Pitt, putting him through a radical 12-step program designed to rehabilitate his individuality. Trouble is, he merely goes from one extreme to another, conforming now to a "Lord of the Flies" morality. With each step, Mr. Norton plunges deeper into violence and anarchy, until his guilty conscience forces him to exorcise his dementia. Only then can he begin anew with his tortured soul mate, played by Helena Bonham Carter, by his side.

There's something very poignant about their bizarre relationship. When they first meet at various illness-support groups, they at least acknowledge a desire to end a steady diet of single servings. But at that point they want love obliquely and painlessly. Ms. Bonham Carter's lament about the condom's being the contemporary version of the glass slipper sums up not only their problem but the dysfunction of postmodern love: "You meet a stranger, you slip it on, you dance all night and you throw it away." Her remark has its intended effect on Mr. Norton, who needs to release his kindness and compassion.

The film is all about losing sight of your most important dreams in the consumer culture of the late 20th century. And Mr. Norton can never articulate what his dream is, even though Mr. Pitt tries to tear it out of him. Still, Mr. Norton begins to see the error of his violent ways when Mr. Pitt threatens to shoot a convenience store clerk unless he promises to pursue his lost hope of becoming a veterinarian. Sometimes you have to be cruel to be kind.

Mr. Cage's problem in Martin Scorsese's "Bringing Out the Dead," which plays like "E.R." on speed, is that he has become a victim of his own kindness and compassion. He's addicted to his saintly role of omnipotent paramedic. Saving people is a high for him, like falling in love, as he suggests. But he hasn't saved anyone in weeks, and he can't sleep; he's haunted by hallucinations of a deceased homeless girl who personifies all of his failures. He sees her everywhere, a reminder that he's not omnipotent and that he has his own weaknesses and needs.

His partners are certainly no help; they are totally detached from their work. John Goodman would just as soon walk away from a challenge; Ving Rhames prefers to ascribe any success to the Lord; Tom Sizemore exhibits enough rage to enroll in Fight Club.

Mr. Cage feels powerless just as the city is being plagued by Red Death, a lethal cocaine that is killing addicts like Marc Anthony, an unbalanced homeless person screaming for help. Mr. Cage is drawn to him, as well as to Patricia Arquette, the lonely daughter of a heart attack victim he has momentarily revived. They are, like him, withered spirits, and hold the key to his redemption.

The film is more than an obvious reversal of "Taxi Driver"; it's the culmination of Mr. Scorsese's quest for spiritual enlightenment. In "Bringing Out the Dead" he has incorporated religious ideas and imagery from "The Last Temptation of Christ" and "Kundun," as in the awe-inspiring "crucifixion" scene on a balcony showered with sparks ressembling fireworks. The film marks a return to Mr. Scorsese's favorite theme, self-destruction as salvation. But here, Mr. Cage finally lets go of the dead and learns to honor the forces beyond his control.

People are not condemned to wander alone in "Bringing Out the Dead"; they can comfort and be comforted. Thus, when Mr. Cage and Ms. Arquette find release in their embrace, the white light bestowed on Mr. Cage now envelops them both. Who would have anticipated such a sublime ending from Mr. Scorsese?

"Magnolia" offers some timely answers, too, but on a much grander scale. In this swirling Altmanesque mosaic, everything seems to happen randomly, nothing makes sense: A suicidal teenager jumps off a roof only to be struck and killed by a bullet on the way down; it's fired by his mother during an argument with his father.

Yet "Magnolia" also demonstrates healing and understanding, especially for the sexual evangelist played by Tom Cruise (his motto: "Seduce and Destroy"). But beneath his bravado is the abuse and abandonment he suffered as a child. Like everything else in this disturbing Paul Thomas Anderson film, answers come when you least expect them. When the characters sing "Wise Up" in unison, it is a magical moment, the strangest deus ex machina this side of "The Ten Commandments." No wonder the film's most telling and repeated line is, "We may be through with the past, but the past ain't through with us."

It is a good sign that these four films address who we are and where we're going. They may be flawed, but at least they are passionate and substantive; we are still grappling with them weeks after we've seen them, which is, after all, what we ask of our movies, and what they ask of us. □

Paramount Pictures

Nicolas Cage is a stressed-out paramedic, a "grief mop," working in Hell's Kitchen in "Bringing Out the Dead," which was released this fall.

Merrick Morton/ 20th Century Fox

Edward Norton, foreground, embraces a fellow support group member, played by the rock singer Meat Loaf Aday, in "Fight Club."

Review/Fashion
GINIA BELLAFANTE
New York Times (1923-Current file); Jan 11, 2000;
ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2006)
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Slim suit, worn with a patterned shirt and bow tie, from Gucci.

Dolce & Gabbana's printed satin shirt and trousers with wide cuffs.

Versace's tank top and zippered pants inspired by "Fight Club."

Review/**Fashion**

In Milan, a 'Fight Club' Mood, But Real Men Suit Up

By GINIA BELLAFANTE

MILAN, Jan. 10 — Last fall, back in the 1900's, America had a talk about men. Were they suffering a collective loss of self-worth, as Susan Faludi argued in her book "Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Male"? Had the shallowness of contemporary culture robbed men of any sense of real masculinity beyond stylish posturing? Are these the reasons the world is now stuck with Maxim magazine?

"Fight Club," starring Brad Pitt and Ed Norton, was the entertainment vehicle for some of these ideas, and it seemed inevitable that the first men's-wear shows of the year 2000 would not go off without a few allusions to the film, which was released to fanfare a few months ago. Set in a nameless city at the very end of the 20th century, "Fight Club" centers on men who feel so softened by a society that forces them to look good and keep neat, Ikea-filled apartments that they meet to beat each other up. Only then can they viscerally experience some notion of heroism and defeat.

A few hours before her show on Saturday in Milan, where the first round of the fall 2000 men's collections are under way, Donatella Versace explained that the clothes she was about to present had a "Fight Club" theme. That theme apparently translated into camouflage-print suits, as well as shirts and jackets, with razor blades sewn onto them. There were also tight, low-slung leather pants loaded with zippers. The zipper one would actually use made a big "U" from front and center to just beneath the lower back. Of these pants, Ms. Versace seemed particularly proud "He's screaming, 'Unzip me,' " she joked when a model tried them on. In fact, the model looked as if he were thinking about maybe trying a different job, like indexing textbooks.

At Versace, razor blades and zippers.

Ms. Versace, who had Jade Jagger and Missy Elliot in the black vinyl seats at her show, said that it was the atmosphere of "Fight Club" she was after, not necessarily the meaning. Few other marketers have topped the Versaces in the realm of objectifying men and holding them to unattainable standards of, well, beauty. For Ms. Versace or any designer to grapple with the movie's meaning would really require abandoning the whole spectacle of a men's fashion show.

Maybe the Belgian designer Dirk Bikkembergs was close to pulling just such a move. He was obviously thinking about the bruised male personality when he turned out his collection. He showed in a desolate space, the kind in which secret, ritualistic fistfighting might take place The show featured models with their shirts off, looking dirty and cut up. Some had black eyes. The clothes themselves were loose, drab and warriorlike, as though the men wearing them were expecting some kind of rumble in the middle of the world's risotto capital.

It probably goes without saying that the mood was very different the following evening at Gucci One has to hand it to Tom Ford, the house's designer, for not latching onto the most obvious and immediate reference to male-identity issues in the pop-cultural arsenal. There were no sharp objects or scarred faces on display. Perhaps because he is a fit Texan, but more likely because he's in command of a very powerful ship at the moment, Mr. Ford probably doesn't sit around thinking much about men who aspire to be something they can't be, or wishing he was as macho as John McCain.

And his customer isn't weighted with this kind of burden, either. He lives for style and doesn't have any complicated feelings about it. He's the guy who has written the most sardonic dot-com ad on television, or started the record label of the moment, or landed a job with Rem Koolhaas. He's in Notting Hill one day, Silver Lake the next. His Palm Pilot reminds him to send Spike Jonze and Sofia Coppola a wedding present.

"Men are less uptight about proving their masculinity," Mr. Ford said the morning of his show. "They are just looser."

It's true that a man would have to be pretty loose, pretty self-possessed to wear some of the things Mr. Ford showed, including shoulder bags with the Gucci logo, fur coats and scarves tied around the head.

Beyond those looks, though, Mr. Ford was reintrepreting his louche sensability within the context of a more classic vocabulary "I'm sick of all that flash," he said "I don't want to see rhinestones anywhere, especially on men " He showed tweed suits, a leap from the velvet of the past, and even bow ties, although unusually large bow ties.

Earlier in the day, Mr. Ford said he didn't send clothes down the runway he couldn't see wearing himself But when he took his bow at the end of the show, it wasn't in an orange leather motorcycle jacket but in a simple black suit and white shirt.

Assuming that Ms. Faludi is on to something when she contends that many young men have lost their sense of usefulness and public purpose, one wonders if they will now take to the suit again, the ultimate symbol of utility and social worth.

At Gucci, tweed and large bow ties.

The suit was featured prominently not only at Gucci and Prada but also at Dolce & Gabbana, a house not known for conformity. Like Gucci's, Dolce & Gabbana's mood was more restrained than it has been in the past. There were double-breasted coats and relics of the Cheever era, two-button suits, which for years have vanished. There was wackiness, too, at Dolce — gold and red velvet pants and floral-print satin shirts. The shirts, though, were shown with ties.

At John Bartlett's collection for Byblos, one of the most reality-based of the Milan's men's shows thus far, good-looking suits appeared among the many knits.

Pinstripe suits seemed appropriate when they were shown at Prada tonight, given that the house is flush with a sense of corporate virility from having won another round in the America's Cup races over the weekend in New Zealand. (Stuck in New Zealand with the flu, Miuccia Prada was unable to attend her own show.) Prada Sport was not displayed this year, presumably to keep the emphasis on the grown-up formality Prada was presenting.

Perhaps it does speak to these confusing times that Ms. Prada showed her suits with thin-soled shoes Tony Soprano might wear to a wedding, and also with oversize ostrich handbags that his therapist, Jennifer Melfi, might covet.

Suit sales have been declining for years. Is this really going to be the hour of their return? "A whole generation has missed out on wearing them," said Robert Lohrer, editor of DNR, the trade magazine devoted to men's clothing. Of course, that generation will have to afford them first

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Associated Press

Prada's two-button pinstripe suit, made hipper with mod sunglasses. Ties are having a renaissance and were seen at many shows.

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Photographs by Corina and Dan Lecca for The New York Times

Camel-colored two-button suit, shown with gloves and a turquoise knit turtleneck, by John Bartlett for Byblos.

Gucci's camel leather jacket with white trousers, head scarf and shoulder bag printed with the G logo.

HOME VIDEO
Peter M. Nichols
New York Times (1923-Current file); Jun 9, 2000;
ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2006)
pg. E24

HOME VIDEO

Peter M. Nichols

A Complex Film In a Plain Wrap

"I always wanted this movie to be wrapped in brown paper, like pornography," David Fincher said. This week Fox released his film "Fight Club" on DVD in a slipcase illustrated to look like a wrapper tied with twine

"I wanted it with the VHS box," he said, "but we gave that up to get the DVD."

In the film, based on a novel by Chuck Palahniuk, a desensitized young insomniac (Edward Norton) calls on a primal aspect of himself, personified by an anarchic 60's-style radical named Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt), to blast out of a sterile existence and rebuild his masculinity Part of the process takes place in a club, started by the two of them, where depressed, threatened young men gather to work out their rage and feelings of inferiority by beating one another bloody.

When "Fight Club" was released last fall, many filmgoers held preconceived notions about its violence and nihilism Generally, though, reviews noted the movie's wit and subtle complexity. "This film twists and turns in ways that only add up fully on the way out of the theater and might just require another viewing," Janet Maslin wrote in The New York Times.

Her thought makes a blurb on the back of the DVD box, but Mr. Fincher said that while he appreciated viewers taking another look on video, the film got its due in theaters. "It's the kind of movie that's going to divide people," he said "You don't read the book and say here's a mainstream fastball."

DVD, he added, is essentially for preservation "I don't know if the film will have another life on DVD, but it will be the record that lasts the longest."

The film comes on two discs in an elaborately designed package that opens like a book. The first disc contains the film in the wide-screen, letter-box format and four separate movie-length commentaries by Mr Fincher, the stars and various others involved, including Mr. Palahnuik and the screenwriter, Jim Uhls.

The director of "Seven," another violent and controversial film starring Mr. Pitt that received frequet ly favorable second thoughts after theater run in 1995, Mr. Fincher is also known for lightning-fast visua and computer-generated manipula tion The technical aspects work b on disc. "I'm much happier havin wide-screen DVD out there than s ply a panned-and-scanned DVD," he said

The second disc has extended scenes of the film being made. "They must have been thinking about DVD or some sort of after-market," said David Pryor, a designer and producer of DVD's who made these discs.

Mr Fincher said that there were no such thoughts at the time, but that he had come to appreciate the wealth of material later.

Much of it was shot from multiple angles "I wanted to use as much of that behind-the-scenes stuff as possible," Mr. Pryor said.

Is all of this, not to mention the hours of commentary, too much? "Nobody is forced to look at it," he said "It's such a dense movie, the more perspectives you can get the better."

Taking a Pre-2001 Inner-Space Odyssey

By BILL DESOWITZ

LOS ANGELES

IN a year defined by the desire to redefine ourselves for the new millennium, the movies of 2000 led the way with as much urgency as optimism, picking up, in a sense, where "American Beauty," "The Sixth Sense," "Fight Club" and "Magnolia" left off last year.

Except last year the answers to meaning and fulfillment were much more elusive.

Bill Desowitz's most recent article for Arts & Leisure was about the writer and director Cameron Crowe

They were the whole point of the journey, and we discovered them right along with the characters. Thus, we had no idea where "American Beauty" was headed until Kevin Spacey's Lester experienced his final revelation about rejoicing in every moment that life has to offer — "the miraculous within the mundane."

This year the answers were easier for us to grasp from the beginning: spending more time with family and friends and less time at work and play. Or rejoining the human race and starting all over again. The struggle was getting characters to the point where we already knew they belonged. The journey was watching them stop resisting change so they could empower themselves. Which is why characters were forced to

Melinda Sue Gordon/Paramount Pictures

Mel Gibson, getting in touch with his feminine side, in "What Women Want."

This year's movies were about digging deeper: Redefining ourselves for the new millennium.

adjust their attitudes in overcoming some of the lingering excesses of the 20th century: materialism, narcissism, ambition and greed.

Obviously 2001 was on the minds of many filmmakers, a gateway to opportunity as well as a daunting deadline. Time was wasting — we needed to turn things around now, they seemed to be suggesting, alluding at various times to "A Christmas Carol," "It's a Wonderful Life" and, yes, "2001: A Space Odyssey": works about finding our way in life with the aid of strangers, friends and spiritual guides. Because there's no sense trying to do it all alone.

No wonder there were so many mentors in the movies of 2000. Have you ever seen so many in a single year? Will Smith, playing

Continued on Page 20

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microfilm.

Demmie Todd/Columbia Pictures

An aspiring writer played by Rob Brown, left, finds a mentor (Sean Connery) in "Finding Forrester."

An Inner-Space Odyssey

Continued From Page 11

God or the ghost of Tiger Woods yet to come, showed a fallen golfer, played by Matt Damon, how to regain his "authentic swing" in "The Legend of Bagger Vance"; Julie Walters, as a ballet instructor, helped the angry young lad played by Jamie Bell trade in his boxing gloves for ballet slippers in "Billy Elliot", Michael Douglas, playing a novelist and professor, coaxed the mysterious student played by Tobey Maguire into storytelling greatness in "Wonder Boys"; Sean Connery portrayed a secretive novelist who tutors a more tentative writer, played by the newcomer Rob Brown, in "Finding Forrester"; Chow Yun Fat, as a martial arts master, guided the talented and tempestuous undercover fighter played by Zhang Ziyi in "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon"; Mr Spacey, playing a disfigured teacher, issued a challenge to his class, and one of his students, played by Haley Joel Osment, responded with random acts of kindness in "Pay It Forward", and Samuel L Jackson, as an extraordinarily brittle comic book collector, searched for a superhero and found a surprising one in the mild-mannered security guard played by Bruce Willis in "Unbreakable."

Education was a vital theme in these movies, to be sure, but there was an interesting dynamic to the mentor-protégé relationships, since all but Mr. Smith played emotionally damaged mentors With enough pain and confusion to go around, you could say the education and wisdom spilled forth in mutually satisfying ways

IN "Wonder Boys," the student (Mr. Maguire) learned how to overcome his morbid view of life and turn his imaginative yarns into disciplined works of literature. At the same time, the wacky misadventures he shared with his professor (Mr. Douglas) pulled the older man through his morass of indecision and inspired him to write a second novel worth telling Even more important, the teacher emerged from the darkness into light with a newfound sense of love and commitment to his mistress (played by Frances McDormand) and their unborn child

Mr Connery, in "Finding Forrester," portrayed a literary wonder man in his own right, as the titular J D. Salinger-like recluse However, unlike the Douglas character, who was afraid of fame and success, Forrester found himself disgusted with writing because a deep sense of loss had overwhelmed him. In secretly tutoring the student portrayed by Mr Brown, he released his anger and rediscovered the power and beauty of language and friendship

Fittingly, Mr Connery redefined his own persona as well, by allowing himself to be more vulnerable than ever before (exceeding even his performance in "Robin and Marian").

For his part, Mr. Brown's student, who hid his writing talent so he wouldn't stand out, learned to balance the cerebral with the physical (he wasn't so shy on the basketball court) and look beyond himself. in life, as in basketball, there is a time for team play and a time for solo moves

Expressing and disciplining the mind and the body were also at the heart of "The Legend of Bagger Vance," "Billy Elliot" and "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" Gotta swing, gotta dance, gotta fly.

Mr Damon, playing a golfing wonder boy who came home shell-shocked from World War I, reclaimed the magic of the game with Zen-like precision during a legendary tournament By mentally focusing on the course as a friendly path and not a hostile obstacle, he became one with nature, entering a whole new sphere of being.

Likewise, Mr Bell, playing the child of a bullying and frustrated miner (Gary Lewis) in an English coal town on strike in the 80's, redirected his aggressive energy by secretly studying ballet He danced feverishly and then sublimely, becoming one with the music somewhere between "I Love to Boogie" and "Swan Lake" But he didn't quite realize it until his tryout with the Royal Ballet School in London. When asked why he likes to dance, he said that it made him feel free and electric. Indeed, this enabled him to eventually liberate himself, his widowed and embittered father, his instructor and his entire town

Becoming one with nature was more fully explored in "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" Here the director Ang Lee redefined the martial-arts film with his own sense and sensibility It was an exquisite adventure not only about youthful abandon and middle-aged regret, but about tapping into life's mysteries, its hidden dragons Mr Chow's swordsman wished to retire from his practice of the martial arts because of the spiritual void in his life That void was filled when he came to terms with his love for his longtime friend, played by Michelle Yeoh, and began, like a proud father, training the character played by Ms Zhang.

According to Mr. Lee, all the cultural repression burdening the characters was expelled from their bodies through the sheer force of their acrobatic battles and weightless leaping The physical transcendence then gave way to a spiritual one, amid the placid splendor of mountains, forests and deserts

Time and space, mind and body became one, evoking the weightless wonders and spiritual beauty of "2001"

In "Unbreakable," Mr Willis's character experienced his own moment of truth — but not before being stifled by sacrifice and compromise Deep down he resented giving up a football career to marry his disapproving girlfriend (Robin Wright Penn) That was the fundamental reason he became estranged from her But when he miraculously survived a train wreck unscathed, a dark secret emerged. he was physically indestructible

That brought him into contact with Mr Jackson, who needed to believe in the power of the Willis character the way we all need to believe in the power of mythology, because it makes us feel stronger

Last year, Mr Willis played another zombie for the director M. Night Shyamalan, in a hushed and haunted world. But now Mr. Willis had the sixth sense — he saw evil people — and he had to come to terms with his superhuman strength. In a world where heroes are hard to find and popular culture can be an addiction, Mr. Shyamalan seemed to be telling us to get a life and achieve our own heroics

However, not everyone had a mentor in the movies of 2000 Many characters were forced into action on their own Some even experienced other freak accidents

In fact, in "The Kid," Mr Willis played a successful and arrogant image consultant who stepped into a time warp with his childhood self (played by Spencer Breslin) to realize his dreams and potential. Never mind that he likely suffered a nervous breakdown as he inched his way closer to 40. His own image was in dire need of repair, but he conveniently blocked all childhood memories And why not? He was the product of physical and emotional abuse.

So out popped young Breslin to get Mr Willis's adult in touch with his inner child so he can grow up and become a caring and responsible human being He underwent a Scrooge-like conversion by facing the ghosts of childhood past and adulthood yet to come, realizing that it was time to settle up and settle down for him and the entire boomer generation

So did Nicolas Cage, who played a narcissistic Wall Street trader who stepped into an alternate world to remake his bachelor life in "The Family Man" One Christmas morning, he wakes up in a house in New Jersey, a father married to the girlfriend (played by Téa Leoni) he abandoned 13 years ago

Stripped of all his prestige and possessions, the trader thus encountered the middle-class anxiety most of us feel. Naturally, only his 6-year-old daughter (Makenzie Vega) noticed he was out of place, asking if he was an alien body snatcher (the premise owed as much to Jack Finney as to Charles Dickens and Frank Capra) But when confronted with his own demons, Mr Cage glimpsed what he truly desired deep within his subconscious, if only he could redirect his talent and passion

An electrical storm made Mel Gibson's character in "What Women Want" a mental "Tootsie," magically giving the chauvinistic ad man and Rat Pack throwback the power to read the female mind and travel from Mars to Venus The experience enabled him to redirect his energy as well

This included collaborating with his savvy new boss (played by Helen Hunt) in winning a prestigious Nike account aimed at the lucrative female market, impressing her with his remarkable sensitivity and awareness — but not before stealing

Finding our way with the aid of guides who were often damaged goods.

her ideas in a workplace battle. But more important, the character played by Mr Gibson (who, like Mr. Connery, redefined his macho persona) managed to win over his estranged teenage daughter (played by Ashley Johnson) by learning to listen for the first time in his life

And what else did Mr. Gibson's character learn as a result of his good fortune? Nothing too earth-shattering Just that women want a buddy, a partner and a lover They want to be in control and they want to be rescued At least his character is one step ahead of most men in satisfying their complex needs

Tom Hanks's character in "Cast Away" needed rescuing in more ways than one

He played a frenzied FedEx systems engineer traveling the world to show carriers how to keep the mail on time. Time was lost on him, though, he was too busy trying to make deadlines and solve problems instead of spending more quality time with his girlfriend (played by Ms Hunt)

But all that changed when he survived a plane crash and found himself all alone on a remote island for four years, a Robinson Crusoe without a Friday (only a Wilson volleyball with a happy face painted in blood) And he had nothing but time on his hands as he tried to sustain himself and find his way back to civilization.

The character literally started from scratch, getting back to basics, adapting objects in the packages washed ashore with him (including an ice-skate blade for opening coconuts) Making a fire after many failed attempts becomes a personal triumph So does finding food Yet the movie wasn't only about physically surviving and returning home. That was only the beginning

It was about defining a whole new set of priorities. It was about emotional growth and spiritual awakening It was about pain It was about loneliness And it was about intimacy

"Cast Away" was all of this year's movies rolled into one

The old adage, "What doesn't kill us, makes us stronger," applies to Mr Hanks's character, an everyman reborn as a mythic one.

Sounds a little like Stanley Kubrick's myth-like "2001," with its Star Child and celestial rebirth imagery. Well, tomorrow the real 2001 arrives, and the myth-making ends But with the help of the movies, we can still dream about better things to come. □

The Big City
JOHN TIERNEY
New York Times (1923-Current file); Feb 16, 2001;
ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2006)
pg. B1

JOHN TIERNEY

The Big City

Distress From a Zipper Out of Season

FASHION WEEK is ending none too soon for my taste. Whatever triumphs others have enjoyed in the tent at Bryant Park, for me it has been a week that began with anxiety and concluded in cruel disillusionment.

The anxiety, of course, was over what to wear to the shows. Although I am not generally regarded as a fashionista, I did follow the coverage of last year's shows offering a preview of this season. And it was clear then what the fashionable man would be wearing today: the "Fight Club" look.

The runways featured skinny teenage boys putting on their best warrior scowls as they paraded in camouflage-print suits and jackets with razor blades sewn into them. For really secure males, there were scarves tied around the head. One model wore manly leather pants with a strange U-shaped zipper extending from above the crotch all the way to the lower back.

"He's screaming, 'Unzip me,' " Donatella Versace explained proudly as the model tried on the leather pants. There was some dispute over the young man's mood — Ginia Bellafante wrote in these pages that the model actually "looked as if he were thinking about maybe trying a different job, like indexing textbooks" — but it seemed obvious to me that the zipper was an instant classic.

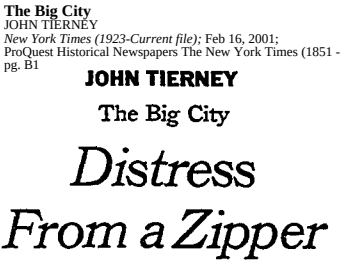
Imagine, then, my Fashion Week distress when I looked into my closet and found only last season's zippers. There was nothing in style, not even a simple head scarf. I slunk into the tent at Bryant Park in non-fighting clothes. But as I looked around at the fashion world elite, the men seemed just as backward as I was.

Their jackets were uncamouflaged and bladeless. Their heads were unscarved. Neither they nor their pants were screaming, "Unzip me." Had they left their razor blades and scarves at home? I sought guidance from a man in a lilac overcoat, Hamish Bowles. But even he, the European editor at large for American Vogue, could not recall seeing many men in "Fight Club" clothes on either side of the Atlantic.

"I know one man with a razor-blade eyebrow barrette," he said, trying to be helpful. After some more ruminating, he recalled owning a head scarf himself 15 years earlier. But that was about it.

"Do *any* men off the runway wear these clothes?" I asked. He answered in the soothing tone of an adult responding to a child's question about Santa Claus.

"Runway shows," he said, "are meant to be loosely interpreted."



Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times

Shail Upadhya, a Nepalese diplomat and amateur fashionista, in his own creation.

OTHER experts gently explained the difference between men's and women's shows. Whereas the more outrageous women's runway fashions do make it on to the backs of socialites and celebrities, men's runway clothes are often made only for the runway. A man's suit does not have the audience appeal of a backless gown or slit skirt, so men's designers have to get attention in other ways.

"On my first trip to Milan, there were men in skirts on the runway," said Art Cooper, the editor in chief of GQ. "I wondered what the hell was going on. Who wears this stuff besides rock stars and drug dealers? But you have to look at it as theater. You can feel the energy at a show with outrageous stuff. It's great fun. It's basically done for the press."

I was beginning to see the rationale for razor blades in suits: publicity for avant-garde fashions on the runway reinforces a designer's brand name, which translates into more sales of bladeless suits, ties and sunglasses. But wasn't there anyone brave enough to wear "Fight Club" clothes for their own sake?

I pinned my last hope on the most daringly dressed man in the audience at Bryant Park, Shail Upadhya, a Nepalese diplomat who described himself as the only amateur fashionista with a day job at the United Nations Secretariat. He was covered from head to toes in self-designed black-and-white swirls and polka dots. "The patterns are at war," he said, referring to the different prints on his cap, suit, shirt and tie, "but there is also peace."

It was clear that camouflage-prints, razor blades, head scarves and U-shaped zippers could not begin to faze such a dresser. But he, too, shook his head when I asked if there were any of "Fight Club" garments in his closet.

"No, I couldn't wear those clothes myself," he said. "They don't make a statement."

Books in Brief

FICTION

CHOKE
By Chuck Palahniuk
Doubleday, $24 95

In Chuck Palahniuk's 1996 cult novel "Fight Club," a young man escapes the emasculating boredom of modern life by indulging his violent, antisocial impulses Victor Mancini, the narrator of Palahniuk's energetic, exasperating new book, also keeps in close touch with his inner bad boy, though what it is he's trying to escape is less clear His operating principle is "What would Jesus NOT do?" Mancini, a medical school dropout, earns his living by playing the role of an indentured servant at a dismal Colonial American theme park and supplements his income by going to restaurants, pretending to choke and allowing people to rescue him His theory is that once someone saves your life he feels responsible for you forever and will send you money (In the novel, at least, this works) To meet women, he cruises sex-addiction recovery workshops "All these people who say they want a life free from sexual compulsion, I mean forget it I mean, what could ever be better than sex?" The plot revolves around the mystery of Mancini's paternity, a question his dying mother may or may not be able to answer Palahniuk is a gifted writer, and the novel is full of terrific lines ("The truth is, every son raised by a single mom is pretty much born married", "Parenthood is the opiate of the masses!") But they can't hold the book together Palahniuk revels in the gross There are protracted bits involving dental floss, slugs and bowel obstructions, and they're not illuminating or subversive — they're sophomoric And while Mancini's musings make up the core of the novel, he remains a murky figure whose motivations are ultimately a puzzle This book is dark, but it's not deep. JENNIFER REESE

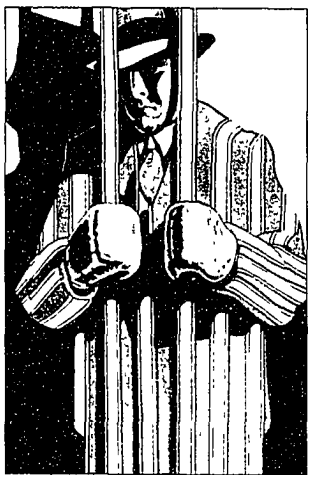
THE ROSE CITY
Stories
By David Ebershoff
Viking, $23 95

A disconsolate girl who is teased by neighborhood children yells from her open window, "'I hope you all die! Every last one of you!' And with that, Nan slammed her window, crushing into its white frame the small bones of the hamster " David Ebershoff's tender and darkly funny collection of stories, which concerns itself for the most part with young gay men, is filled with moments like this people try to claim a measure of control over their lives, only to be undermined by moments of bumbling shame In "The Dress," for example, a 10-year-old boy puts on a dress in his parent's bathroom and ties the sash so tight that he requires his father's assistance to extricate himself — while his involuntary erection points up like a finger As in his novel "The Danish Girl," which was about the first man to undergo a successful sex change, Ebershoff gives us characters who encounter "the flash of the judging world's camera bulb" and are captured "in an inaccurately guilt-loaded shot " His stories provide sympathetic contexts for stinging memories Yet his characters' intense shame also makes them distrustful Ebershoff's young men tend to hold almost every close relation at a great distance, seemingly for fear of being hurt even more As a result, each story seems only a different window on the condition of solitary confinement
CHARLES WILSON

YOU THINK YOU HEAR
By Matt O'Keefe
Thomas Dunne/St Martin's, $23 95

For a young band seeking college radio air play, the cross-country road tour is a necessary evil But when you consider how much time these people must be willing to spend together in a van, you might wonder whether the band is simply their excuse for driving from one club to the next to sample the mixed nuts and luncheon meats provided in the dressing room spreads This is just one of the thoughts we get to chew on in Matt O'Keefe's first novel, "You Think You Hear " Lou Farren becomes a roadie for his college friends, whose band totters on the brink of stardom Like Lou, the principals of the Day Action Band — Tim, Joey and Cree — still live in a college-informed universe several years after graduation This owes partly to the fact that students constitute their bread and butter, but also to their fear of a universe in which you can't play hackey sack at will, fling slices of ham at a wall or make things with the candle wax at expensive restaurants Lou, our ironically detached guide on this trip from Delaware to Los Angeles, knows his primary purpose is to sell T-shirts He also seems to know that the tour will be a rite of passage as he attempts to do something about his unrequited love for Cree and find some degree of nobility in being a person in the music world who doesn't make music Lou has enough wit, insight and warmth to keep us entertained, the problem is that Lou's narrative is so omniscient as to foretell an epiphany before he even gets started And whatever he does learn about himself and the band members never goes farther than his own thought bubble per the code of the van, you can share a joint, or your initial impressions about Tom Petty and Rush, but anything more is simply uncool
BARBARA SUTTON

Dysfunctional Famiglia



Jimmy Breslin likes to write about ineptitude — check out his wonderful account of the hapless 1962 Mets, "Can't Anybody Here Play This Game?" or his novel "The Gang That Couldn't Shoot Straight," based on the life and times of the gangster Joey Gallo — and thus the mob has always been right up his alley In **I DON'T WANT TO GO TO JAIL: A Good Novel (Little, Brown, $24.95),** Breslin focuses on Fausti the Fist Dellacava, a former boxer who runs a Greenwich Village-based mob family, and his nephew, also named Fausti, who is desperately searching for a way to go legit — he's looking for a real job. They do have one thing in common, though Both are doing their best to stay out of prison The Fist, who bears an uncanny resemblance to the gangster Vincent the Chin Gigante, right down to mumbling inanities and roaming the streets in his pajamas and bathrobe, chooses the insanity route to avoid the slammer, while Fausti goes so far as to change his name legally to Blanfort G Melton and become a partner in a business offering Mob Star trading cards Breslin wants to explain why the mob of Lucky Luciano and Meyer Lansky has fallen on such hard times lately — most of its so-called leaders are languishing in jail — and, for the most part, he's successful But as a novel, "I Don't Want to Go to Jail" is flawed, often reading more like a series of colorful newspaper columns than a cohesive story Still, Breslin's trademarks are all here deft observations, sharp characterizations and wit
CHARLES SALZBERG

THE GOOD PEOPLE OF NEW YORK
By Thisbe Nissen.
Knopf, $23

Thisbe Nissen's first novel begins on a shaky note. The first chapters of this sprawling story are about Roz Rosenzweig, a flamboyant Jewish New Yorker, and her marriage to Edwin, an uptight Nebraskan, and they are often clichéd and sometimes awkwardly written But "The Good People of New York" grows on you It turns out not to be so much a story of Roz and Edwin as it is about their daughter, Miranda Nissen dedicates the book to her parents and has said it grew out of a short story about their courtship But she doesn't discover her voice as a novelist until Miranda finds hers as a character As a result, the last two-thirds of the book are deeply satisfying Nissen tracks the young Miranda through her parents' divorce, her years of summer camp, her tumultuous relationship with her mother and her distant father Nissen is especially affecting when describing a lonely Miranda as a modern latchkey kid, spending her afternoons in an empty apartment, watching TV and painting her nails A few years later, at summer camp, Miranda discovers what she hopes will get her through adolescence "Maybe she'll have that — sex, she'll have sex — with which to start eighth grade, and maybe as she holds that knowledge it will fill her and protect her, a magic coat of armor to take her through this booby trap, trip wire, hidden pit, kamikaze world " Sex of course, turns out to be as much of a trap as anything else, but it's enjoyable to watch Miranda try to extricate herself from it and everything else that trips her up in life
DANA KENNEDY

DAVID'S STORY
By Zoë Wicomb
Feminist Press, $19 95

Zoe Wicomb's first novel is set in South Africa in 1991, just as Nelson Mandela is released from prison The book chronicles the lives of David Dirkse, an anti-apartheid activist, Sally, a fellow protester who married David and became a housewife, and the mysterious Dulcie, David's comrade and, perhaps, lover. This ambitious novel also recounts the history of the Griquas, David's mixed-race ancestors, and their quest for a homeland in the late 19th and early 20th centuries "David's Story" is a kaleidoscopic book — its story is fragmented and colorful, its focus continuously shifting The effect is dizzying, especially for readers unfamiliar with the setting Wicomb has an ear for the quirks of Griqua speech, an eye for evocative detail and a deep well of sympathy for her characters But she has little use for conventional narrative, and "David's Story" leaves too many loose ends who is trying to kill David and Dulcie, and why? Who are the men that come by night to rape Dulcie, and why does she submit? Wicomb may be making a larger point about the painful ambiguities of life in South Africa, but it comes at the expense of the reader's full engagement with her fictional world
TOM BEER

Terror in a Manhattan brownstone: Jodie Foster stars in the thriller "Panic Room," directed by David Fincher.

Luxury Home, Built-In Trouble

By A. O. SCOTT

"Panic Room" belongs, with movies like "Rosemary's Baby" and "Single White Female," to a small, appropriately exclusive subgenre: the Manhattan luxury real estate thriller. In spite of their apparent parochialism, these movies appeal to the universal, complementary emotions of smugness and envy. New Yorkers (or anybody else) who must do without several thousand light-flooded, architecturally distinguished square feet — most of us, that is — can marvel at the good luck of those who do live like this, and then, once the bad stuff starts to happen, thank our lucky stars that we are not in their shoes.

PANIC ROOM

These pictures both incite class resentment and soothe it. In the case of "Panic Room," watching Meg Altman (Jodie Foster) contend with the mayhem and terror of a single night in her newly purchased, four-story brownstone on the Upper West Side will give you new appreciation for your own cramped, cluttered, noisy home.

Meg's house — which she moves into with her young daughter, Sarah (Kristen Stewart), after separating from her wealthy, unfaithful husband — is so spacious that an extra room has been carved out of the master suite as a high-tech superfortified hiding place. This "panic room" — "a popular feature in high-end construction these days," according to the strangely hostile agent (Ian Buchanan) who shows Meg the house — may seem like a sensible precaution, just in case, God forbid, anything bad should happen. In a movie like this one, God does not forbid for very long, and a sensible precaution turns out to be a sure-fire way of inviting trouble.

Trouble delivers its R.S.V.P. on Meg and Sarah's very first night of residence, in the form of three housebreakers who want

Continued on Page 30

Luxury Home With Built-In Trouble

Continued From Weekend Page 1

something very valuable that the previous owner has left behind. The thieves are a mismatched lot, consisting of a high-strung rich kid gone bad called Junior (Jared Leto, in cornrows and a scruffy beard), a sorrowful family man named Burnham (Forest Whitaker, in blue coveralls) and a sociopath known, improbably, as Raoul (Dwight Yoakam, in a black ski mask).

When they are not arguing about how many of them should be on the job, how much money they stand to gain, whether they should be armed and how the rules of escrow work in real estate transactions, they try to figure out how to pry Meg out of her impenetrable sanctuary. She, meanwhile, tries to figure out how to chase them away and summon help, all the while watching them on a bank of video monitors (made, we are repeatedly invited to notice, by Sony, which just happens to be the corporate parent of Columbia Pictures, the studio responsible for this film).

"You know how this is going to end, don't you?" Raoul asks Burnham at one especially tense moment, and long before the question is asked, most of the audience is likely to know the answer. Not in every particular, perhaps — there are some fine, jolting surprises along the way — but "Panic Room" operates within a strict and narrow set of conventions. It could be an especially grisly, profanity-laced entry in the "Home Alone" series. And, it must be said, an exceptionally well-directed one.

The absence of overwhelming suspense does not detract from the moment-to-moment tension and indeed frees you to enjoy the film's technical accomplishment. The director, David Fincher, came to prominence in 1995 with "Seven," which similarly discovered new visual and stylistic possibilities in a formula that we had seen many times before and have seen many times since, in that case, detectives penetrating the twilight world of a supercreepy serial killer.

Jared Leto (rear), Dwight Yoakam (in mask) and Forest Whitaker, the baddies in "Panic Room."

Mr. Fincher also directed "Fight Club," a wildly ambitious, nearly successful attempt to translate Chuck Palahniuk's fable of dystopian macho into a coherent film. The look and atmosphere of that picture were so fresh, so persuasive, and so well matched to the slick aggression of the source material that the logical instability of the story almost didn't matter.

"Panic Room," with its predictable narrative, small cast of characters, and severe constraints on time and space, is a less grandiose undertaking. Aside from brief scenes at the beginning and the very end, the whole thing takes place on a single set in a single night. But its challenges were clearly attractive to the director, and his camera sense and assured pacing make it an above-average thriller.

Mr. Fincher has mastered the traditional syntax of cinematic suspense: the shifting points of view, startling cuts and slow camera movements that work subliminally to fill us with dread and anxiety. But he also uses computer-assisted techniques to amplify the effects, extending what the camera can do. Early in "Panic Room," it pulls back from Meg's bedside and executes a dazzling, impossible three-dimensional tracking shot, swooping down through the central staircase, caroming through the hallways and finally penetrating the back-door keyhole. Mr. Fincher routinely suspends the laws of physics, passing through walls and doors and viewing the action from above, below and often, it seems, from two perspectives at once.

PANIC ROOM

Directed by David Fincher; written by David Koepp; directors of photography, Conrad W. Hall and Darius Khondji; edited by James Haygood and Angus Wall; music by Howard Shore; production designer, Arthur Max; produced by Gavin Polone, Judy Hofflund, Mr. Koepp and Cean Chaffin; released by Columbia Pictures. Running time: 108 minutes. This film is rated R.

WITH: Jodie Foster (Meg Altman), Forest Whitaker (Burnham), Dwight Yoakam (Raoul), Jared Leto (Junior), Kristen Stewart (Sarah Altman), Ann Magnuson (Lydia Lynch) and Ian Buchanan (Evan Kurlander).

Even the most impressive technique can do only so much, and David Koépp's script, efficient though it is, is not very original. The acting is fine, but everyone here has been better — and similar — elsewhere. Mr. Whitaker is somber, world weary and morally complicated, and Ms. Foster is steely and vulnerable. Mr. Leto and Mr. Yoakam add some anxious comic energy, and young Ms. Stewart is good enough to help you overlook just what a stock character the smart-alecky, sensitive-underneath-it-all Sarah really is.

But none of the actors have been granted sufficient room for a real performance, and we never believe in the characters enough to care about what happens to them. "Panic Room" was skillfully constructed, no doubt at considerable expense, but it's hard to shake the feeling that nobody's really home.

"Panic Room" is rated R (Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian). It has many scenes of graphic violence, some of it directed at the walls and windows of a beautiful old house.

BOOKS OF THE TIMES
JANET MASLIN
New York Times (1923-Current file); Sep 12, 2002;
ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2007)
pg. E9

BOOKS OF THE TIMES

A Seller of Unreal Estate: Creepy Is as Creepy Does

By JANET MASLIN

LULLABY

By Chuck Palahniuk
260 pages. Doubleday. $24.95.

In his tireless pursuit of the outrageous, the author of "Fight Club" has written a novel about a murderous song. Chuck Palahniuk's impressively febrile imagination now yields "Lullaby," the story of a sweet-sounding weapon of mass destruction.

Given Mr. Palahniuk's gift for ferociously dark humor, it goes without saying that this capability will be used for purposes of malicious mischief. After all, the author's last book, "Choke," was about a man who made his living by pretending to choke in restaurants, then collecting damages. But this time the anarchic high jinks have a more serious side. "Lullaby" contemplates rampant evil, but it is also, however backhandedly, about the power to do good.

"Lullaby" begins with a house where the words "Get Out" are scratched on the living room floor. Perfect: this is just the kind of place that the pink-haired real estate agent Helen Hoover Boyle loves to sell. It's great business for her to market "a Queen Anne, five bedrooms, with a mother-in-law apartment, two gas fireplaces, and the face of a barbiturate suicide that appears late at night in the powder room mirror."

When it comes to the ideal new listing: "What she needed was blood running down the walls. She needed ice-cold invisible hands that pull children out of bed at night. She needed blazing red eyes in the dark at the foot of the basement stairs. That and decent curb appeal." When she sells a house like that one, she's apt to be selling it again very soon. Helen is in the midst of one such comically creepy transaction when the book's hero and narrator, Carl Streator, comes her way.

Streator — looks like "Creator," from an author with a taste for the messianic — is a journalist. "I'm a reporter now, on a big-city daily, and I don't have to imagine anything," he tells the reader. But he finds his imagination working overtime when he is assigned to investigate a series of babies who have fallen victim to sudden infant death syndrome. This is as close as Mr. Palahniuk comes to anchoring a plot in the real world.

It turns out that the babies have been done in by whatever appears on Page 27 of a book called "Poems and Rhymes From Around the World." And it turns out that both Carl and Helen have private reasons for being galvanized by this discovery. Together, they set out to round up copies of the deadly verse, and to ponder its implications for the world at large. "A million people might watch a television show, then be dead the next morning because of an advertising jingle," Carl surmises. "Imagine the panic. Imagine a new Dark Age."

Imagining such things is Mr. Palahniuk's mordant specialty, one that he hones more sharply with each new effort. While "Lullaby" lacks the wild fantasy component of "Fight Club," it has a tighter focus and a more timely, compelling brand of desperation. Somewhere inside the book's frequently hilarious flippancy there is an authentic urgency, as Mr. Palahniuk rails away at the frustrations of contemporary culture. In a world of runaway self-interest, noise pollution, wretched excess and "franchised life forms" (he finds kudzu and starlings as ubiquitous as fast food), his idea of deploying a killer lullaby actually offers some kind of meaningful moral choice.

Carl is at first prompted to take advantage of the song's power; not for nothing is Mr. Palahniuk highly popular with adolescent males. So without even trying, he knocks off a few individuals who annoy him, like his editor at the newspaper and a radio talk show host. Then Carl's perspective is changed by two younger characters, including a Wiccan named Mona. While visiting Mona's apartment with Carl, Helen drinks a glass of wine she finds on the mantle. "That's the *altar!*" Mona complains.

"Well, how about you get *The Goddess* another sacrifice," Helen replies, "but make it a double this time." The author has a divinely subversive way with that kind of wisecrack, and with deadpan accounts of events like a Wiccan meeting: "Then someone named Lentils arrives, or someone brings lentils, it's not clear which."

The other young character, and the one who turns Carl around, is a guy named Oyster, who specializes in subversive pranks. "I want to be what killed the dinosaurs," Oyster says. And he further articulates the book's sense of apocalyptic menace by announcing, "Every generation wants to be the last." With the more mature overview of "Lullaby," Mr. Palahniuk has reached the point of writing from the endangered side of that threat.

For all its power to invoke peril, "Lullaby" is written as a kind of incantation. Like Kurt Vonnegut, Mr. Palahniuk juggles nihilism and idealism with fluid, funny ease, and he repeats and rephrases word patterns until they take on an almost mystical aspect. The singsong cadence of this book is artfully achieved, from sentences that begin "For whatever reason . . ." to an ominous counting refrain. "Lullaby" also describes colors with a kind of editorial exactitude, used for eerie emphasis: "Her suit is light blue, but it's not a regular robin's-egg blue. It's the blue of a robin's egg you might find and then worry that it won't hatch because it's dead inside."

As Helen, Carl, Mona and Oyster develop impromptu family conflicts and the pursuit of the lullaby begins to require resolution, "Lullaby" spins out of control. The outlandishness of its premise dissolves into the literary version of a special-effects movie mess, to the point where characters even begin to inhabit other characters' bodies. ("I hate ready-to-wear, but any port in a storm," Helen says upon becoming somebody less attractive.) But with this fourth novel, Mr. Palahniuk further refines his ability to create parables that are as substantial as they are off-the-wall.

Name That Tune

The hero of Chuck Palahniuk's ghoulish picaresque embarks on a road trip armed with a song that has the power to kill.

LULLABY
By Chuck Palahniuk.
260 pp. New York:
Doubleday. $24.95.

By Virginia Heffernan

CHUCK PALAHNIUK has already declared that his warped new novel — it's about a song that kills — makes his ultraviolent first novel, "Fight Club" (1996), look like "Little Women." These words are bound to excite Palahniuk's hard-bitten acolytes, who were inspired by "Fight Club" to lionize him for his gallows humor, his gift for rendering the rapture of being hit and his way with "twist" endings. But Palahniuk's more recent novels — "Survivor" (1999), "Invisible Monsters" (1999) and the best seller "Choke" (2001) — have been looser and milder than his debut. His readers are currently loyal, but not rapturous.

With the brutal and heavily plotted "Lullaby," Palahniuk might reclaim the title of messianic superwriter. The novel is a nauseating picaresque, the story of Carl Streator, a newspaper reporter who is investigating crib deaths — and getting in touch with his own homicidal side. Less than zero is sacred in "Lullaby," in which Carl, who has memorized the words to a song that lulls people into death, hits the road with a wicked real estate agent named Helen Hoover Boyle, who also knows the killer song. En route, ghoulish things happen, things that sound like this: "She tosses the dead child across the room where it clatters against the steel cabinet. . . . A frozen arm breaks off. . . . The armless, legless body, a broken doll . . . spins against the wall and the head breaks off."

"Lullaby" functions on one level as an extended, literate dead-baby joke. In their macabre partnership, Carl and Helen barge into libraries to retrieve all copies of the one anthology that contains the lethal spell (an African "culling song") under the pretense that they must keep it out of the wrong hands — though their own hands are hardly more right, since many people die at them. Looking on from the backseat are Mona, a young Wiccan, and her boyfriend, Oyster, an ecoterrorist; these tag-alongs, depraved in their own ways, seem like runaways from a grunge-era road movie. As characters, they don't come to much.

"Lullaby's" second function is more labored. Palahniuk has said that this novel grew out of his anger with a loud neighbor, and it does contain a sustained tirade against noise. Carl loathes "sound-oholics" and "quiet-ophobics." Later, when he becomes a serial killer, people who talk too much — a yapping radio host, a meddling editor — don't fare well. Dead, they shut up, and their silence is imagined as a kind of heaven.

This is ostentatiously paradoxical, because the channel to that heaven is, of course, language — the song that Carl has inadvertently learned by heart, the song that keeps popping into his head in moments of frustration. In one of the novel's multiple refrains, we get a partial justification for the casualties: "There are worse things you can do to the people you love than kill them." According to Carl, a child exposed to the cacophony of music and television may be better off dead. His own daughter, suitably, is.

Along the way, Palahniuk indulges in some Tolkien-like mythopoetics ("When there's the possibility of a little power, you already want more"), but the philosophy is thin. What keeps you reading "Lullaby" are Palahniuk's formal games, and specifically his aspiration to quicken his prose to pure verb.

The flip side of Palahniuk's love of verbs is his scorn for adjectives. Ordinary description here is scant. Occasionally we get a material ("white oak" or "stainless steel") or, rarely, something like a "big" sigh. Unlike other minimalist writers, however, Palahniuk sets off passages stripped of adjectives with absurdist passages in which he elaborately satirizes his pared-down style. When he sketches characters, for example, he makes it clear that he's acting under orders from the genre: "The details about Henderson are he's got blond hair combed across his forehead," we read, or, "The details about Nash are, he's a big guy in a white uniform." This trick starves readers hungry for visual details and at the same time makes us face our reflexive hunger by stuffing us with junk images.

Palahniuk's facility with this kind of satire also comes in the form of multiple parodies of overblown color vocabulary. "It's green," he writes of an outfit, "but not the green of a lime . . . more the green of avocado bisque topped with a paper-thin sliver of lemon, served ice cold in a yellow Sèvres soup plate." Or, comparably: "Everywhere outside the car it was yellow. . . . Not a lemon yellow, more a tennis-ball yellow . . . the way the ball looks on a bright green tennis court."

These sections recur insistently, and are just shy of funny, but in the course of reading "Lullaby" you look forward to them. Palahniuk's efforts to denature color, to turn it into J. Crew catalog copy, demonstrate his hooligan energy at its most joyful and rambunctious. "Lullaby" can be read as a punk novel with sudden synth-pop interludes.

In "Little Women," Jo March, an aspiring writer, confesses, "I always wanted to do the killing part." But she never succeeds in composing original scenes of violence — and neither did Louisa May Alcott, who, however sweetly we remember her, did write gory scenes of her days as a nurse. Palahniuk doesn't succeed either; his murders are too many to be moving and too few to give the story the heft and scope of an apocalyptic vision. "Lullaby" feels like a reckless first draft, seemingly written on a binge; reading it is like reading a long e-mail message about someone's senseless, if inventive, nightmare. □

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Beyond the Fringe
Taylor Antrim
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pg. A5

Beyond the Fringe

Two books by Chuck Palahniuk: a thriller and a tour of the dark side of his Northwest hometown.

FUGITIVES AND REFUGEES

A Walk in Portland, Oregon.
By Chuck Palahniuk.
175 pp. New York:
Crown Journeys/Crown Publishers. $16.

DIARY

By Chuck Palahniuk.
261 pp. New York:
Doubleday. $24.95.

ANDREW NICHOLSON

By Taylor Antrim

READERS may expect certain things from a Chuck Palahniuk novel: a narrator with a messiah complex, taxonomies of eccentric information, pithy single-sentence paragraphs and a few overexplicit statements of theme. His first novel, "Fight Club" (1996), established the formula with potent, hammering prose. That novel's story of two disaffected young men who turn an underground club of pugilists into an anarchist army articulated a distinctively male version of unfocused disappointment and bottled rage. Late in the book, the novel's antihero, Tyler Durden, gives his demographic a loose definition. "We are the middle children of history," he says, "raised by television to believe that someday we'll be millionaires and movie stars and rock stars, but we won't."

Seven years and one popular Hollywood film adaptation later, Durden's line has taken on shades of irony. Thanks to Brad Pitt, Tyler Durden is a movie star of sorts — and Palahniuk, once a mechanic for Freightliner, is now a best-selling writer with a legion of fans. They camp outside bookstores before his readings, gather for conferences on his novels and post fictional and exegetical tributes to his work at chuckpalahniuk.net (a Web site known as "the cult"). Though none of Palahniuk's four subsequent novels seem to inspire the breathless worship fans pay "Fight Club," his fiction has kept resolutely to that book's aesthetic spirit, and to its countercultural theme. The final pages of "Choke" (2001) read like an anthem of the dispossessed: "Here we are, the Pilgrims, the crackpots of our time, trying to establish our own alternate reality. To build a world out of rocks and chaos." Similarly plain-spoken homilies may be found in last year's "Lullaby" ("Maybe without Big Brother filling us, people could think") and in "Invisible Monsters" ("We're all such products"), from 1999.

Palahniuk is a skilled enough entertainer to know that didacticism goes best with a heavy chaser of violence and kinky sex. In "Lullaby," for instance, he gave us black magic, dead babies, necrophilia — and a warning about the atrophying effects of mass media. Herein lies his appeal; Palahniuk writes cult fiction heavy with message, novels that seem both lurid and edifying.

Always productive, Palahniuk has been working especially hard lately, adding two new titles to his *oeuvre:* a quirky guide to his home city, Portland, Ore., and an absorbing thriller with big ideas about Art. Both are portraits of the artist in search of immortality, the first autobiographical (and occasionally self-mythologizing), the second creepy and inventive.

"Fugitives and Refugees" — part of the Crown Journeys series of short travel books — takes its title from a pronouncement made by Katherine Dunn, the author of the novel "Geek Love," about Portlanders: "All we are are the fugitives and refugees." Awkward syntax aside, this is a good description of Palahniuk's target audience. He writes for the fringe, and thus his guide to Portland details the city's paranormal landmarks, its eccentric museums and, most thoroughly, its sex industry — from Kinkfest, an "annual weekend of workshops and play parties organized by the Portland Leather Alliance" to a basement "paramilitary" sex club called Zippers Down. Conversational in style and personal in approach, Palahniuk's tribute to Portland feels more like a memoir than a city guide. In interchapter "postcards" Palahniuk recalls, among other scenes, his first acid trip (at a Pink Floyd laser show in 1981), the time he got beaten up in 1991 and a debauched New Year's Eve screening of "Fight Club" in 1999. For the nonfan these fragments won't add up to much, memories both slightly unbelievable and insistently bizarre. For readers devoted to his books, they'll no doubt be reassuring. Here's a writer whose life looks a lot like his fiction.

At the end of "Fugitives and Refugees," Palahniuk writes: "The most I can ever do is to write things down. To remember them. The details. To honor them in some way." This instinct, writing as an act of self-preservation, gives Palahniuk's new novel (and better testament to his talents) its force. "Diary" is the story of a lonely artist named Misty Marie Wilmot and the spooky community of blue-blood islanders she's married into. Misty is Palahniuk's second attempt at a female protagonist (the first, from "Invisible Monsters," was a fashion model with a mutilated face), and she's one of his most human, sensitively drawn narrators. Her story takes the form of a diary written to her husband, Peter, who lies contorted and comatose in the hospital after a suicide attempt. On Waytansea Island, the Wilmot ancestral home, Misty struggles to take care of their daughter, Tabbi, and Peter's mother, Grace, while making ends meet as a maid at the island hotel. It turns out that Peter, who worked as a remodeler, went a little crazy before he tried to kill himself, walling off rooms in summer houses after scrawling frightening messages inside. In one kitchen he wrote, "Set foot on the island and you will die." And in another, "Waytansea Island will kill every last one of God's children if it means saving our own."

There's a dark island legend here, one in which Misty will figure (in good Palahniuk fashion) as a kind of savior-artist. Her diary's atmosphere of paranoia and dread deepens as Misty rediscovers her gift for painting and the Waytansea locals begin to circle around her like sharks.

Like Palahniuk's other novels, "Diary" brims with trivia — on, for example, graphology, Jainism and the ailments of artists through history. The prose is also typical, a jabbing style of short, repetitive sentences that wear on you over time ("Everything is a self-portrait." "Everything is a diary." "Everything we say shows our hand. Our diary.") Palahniuk poses useful, if familiar, questions about the necessity of suffering to the artist's work, and his story has genuine momentum. Still, "Diary" founders a little on lines like "It's so hard to forget pain, but it's even harder to remember sweetness." Or: "You can paint anything because the only thing you ever reveal is yourself." Such profundities may be Palahniuk's stock in trade, yet a writer of his confidence and imaginative skill hardly needs them. "Diary" really hits its stride when the blood starts flowing (one memorable scene involves an unwanted leg cast and a steak knife). Palahniuk is better at sensation than philosophy, a pulp writer who excels when he stops worrying the big ideas and channels his wild, misfit heart. ❑

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Two People in Comas, But One's Still Awake
JANET MASLIN
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pg. E8

BOOKS OF THE TIMES

Two People in Comas, But One's Still Awake

By JANET MASLIN

Discussing his dealings with fans in last week's "Newsweek," Chuck Palahniuk acknowledged some unusual tactics. He likes to send out "a package of weird little surprises," he said, when communicating with readers, who become ever more smitten, for obvious reasons. Tiaras and night lights are among the party favors. But the author's weirdest surprises can still be found in bookstores. "Diary" is his sixth novel.

For all his trademark toughness, Mr. Palahniuk has never sounded more like a latter-day Kurt Vonnegut than he does here. Yes, Mr. Palahniuk remains best known for the violent twists of "Fight Club." And he is the popular novelist who would be most at home at the Bates Motel. But his use of singsong repetition, in the form of trademark tics or obsessively invoked subject matter, can be as soothing as a lullaby.

Still, Mr. Palahniuk is someone whose idea of bedtime music (in "Lullaby," the novel preceding this one) is a song that actually kills its listeners. So he shares Mr. Vonnegut's wildly inventive sense of doom. And he, too, is capable of the last-minute switching of gears that can turn a darkly ominous story into a source of heart-tugging inspiration. He has not lost that "Fight Club" knack for the eleventh-hour surprise.

"Diary" is the author's least spiky fiction thus far, if only because its heroine is a waitress with a background in art. (And what a background it turns out to be.) Her name is Misty Wilmot, and she is a quasi-widow. Her husband, Peter, is in a mysterious coma as the book begins, and Misty is worn out and angered by the ordeal of monitoring his condition. In art school, where these two met, "you learn the symptoms of adult lead poisoning include tiredness, sadness, weakness, stupidity," Mr. Palahniuk writes, "symptoms Misty has had most of her adult life."

> A latter-day Kurt Vonnegut with a knack for the 11th-hour surprise.

To be sure, this author's version of a mainstream book finds plenty of time for Misty to stick pins in Peter, just to check on his reflexes. (They're gone.) And it finds time to express sardonic fury, often in the form of teasing meteorological details. ("The weather today is partly angry, leading to resignation and ultimatums." "Today's weather is partly furious with occasional fits of rage.") Tapping into such anger remains a major part of Mr. Palahniuk's appeal.

But a lot of his attention is also reserved for easier, barn-size targets like the rich summer vacationers, "asking for nondairy cream and sundresses in size 2," who descend upon the once-peaceful Waytansea Island. (The wordplay of Waytansea, along with character names like Angel Delaporte, becomes one of the author's broad, effective ways of elbowing readers' ribs.)

Associated Press

DIARY

By Chuck Palahniuk
262 pages. Doubleday. $24.95.

In "Diary" Misty, "who doesn't have the spare time to throw a fit," keeps a journal about her husband's sleeping coma as well as her own waking one. But this is not a book in which even her simplest observations can be taken at face value. Not even a sentence like "Just marry me, the island will give you the biggest wedding anybody's seen in a hundred years," is what it seems.

So in addition to unraveling the story's opening mystery — that certain rooms have been vanishing from certain houses, thanks to Peter's creative use of Sheetrock before his coma began — the reader's game of wait-and-see involves wondering where all the hints, patterns and secular mantras will lead. Though the outcome is long overdue and less exotic than some of Mr. Palahniuk's previous denouements, it is worth the sometimes maddening wait.

"Diary" harps on certain trivia. ("Indian yellow is the urine of cattle fed mango leaves.") But it seems seriously intrigued by the realm where art, science and witchcraft overlap. As precision collides with inspiration here, and as Misty becomes a one-woman battleground for conflicting notions of true talent, the book's mannerisms give way to Mr. Palahniuk's real and easily formulated convictions. Happily, he is never too solemn to write, "This has got to be how Judy Garland felt when she read 'Valley of the Dolls.' "

Mr. Palahniuk continues to lard his fiction with quotable highlights, even if a few would be more at home on T-shirts and, given his star-struck following, are liable to wind up that way. Weird minutiae about facial muscles, junk jewelry and the tiny waists of performers on Spanish-language soap operas accompany satirical art school stories that celebrate the author's fondness for pranks. Misty recalls the classmate who "drank different colors of egg temperas, then drank syrup of ipecac that made her vomit her masterpiece." In a book that contrasts Misty with Waytansea's crumbling upper crust, it's noted that this student "drove to class on a moped from Italy that cost more than the trailer where Misty grew up."

Then there is the student who turned her mouth into a stage, with her teeth as footlights, and put on a three-act puppet show therein. "One night in a gallery, doing a tiny version of 'The Greatest Story Ever Told,' this girl almost died when a tiny camel slipped down her throat," the book explains. "These days, she was probably rolling in grant money."

Life and art may not be that unfair, on the evidence of watching Mr. Palahniuk hitting his stride.

The Enduring Charm of Freaky Violence
JANET MASLIN
New York Times (1923-Current file); Jun 14, 2004;
ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2007)
pg. E7

BOOKS OF THE TIMES

The Enduring Charm of Freaky Violence

By JANET MASLIN

Readers who admire Chuck Palahniuk's toughness may be surprised to find him bringing up "The Joy Luck Club" and "How to Make an American Quilt" in the introduction to his new nonfiction collection. They may be surprised to find him referring to the "skill set" that goes into shaping a character in one of his novels. And they may be surprised that he regards writing as lonely work and looks for ways to make it less so.

On the other hand loneliness looks pretty good in the wake of "Testy Festy," the first story here. It describes an event called the Rock Creek Lodge Testicle Festival near Missoula, Mont. Many participants are happily naked, but they stand in line to buy souvenir T-shirts all the same.

As this may indicate, when Mr. Palahniuk ventures out into the world in his capacity as a journalist (some of these articles have been published previously, mostly in out-of-the-way publications like Bikini Review), he gravitates toward as much freakishness as he can find. So there are pieces in this collection about people who build castles and toy rockets. There are interviews with Marilyn Manson and Juliette Lewis. There are wrestlers, psychics, demolition derby enthusiasts. There are two individuals in downtown Seattle dressed, respectively, as a bear and a Dalmatian.

It just so happens that the latter is the author himself.

"Young men stone us," he writes about playing animal dress-up. "Young women grope us. Middle-aged men look away, shaking their heads and ignoring the dog that waits in line with them at Tully's for a grande latte." Why the strong reaction? Well, violence and weirdness have a way of following Mr. Palahniuk around.

The two most frequently mentioned events in this collection are violent, weird and not unrelated. Both occurred in 1999. The first was the release of the instantly mythic movie "Fight Club," adapted from Mr. Palahniuk's novel. The second was the murder of his father, apparently by the jealous ex-husband of a woman the senior Mr. Palahniuk met via a personals ad, an ad headlined "Kismet."

Shawn Grant

STRANGER THAN FICTION
True Stories

By Chuck Palahniuk
233 pages. Doubleday. $23.95

Then there's the Dalmation waiting on line for a grande latte.

Earlier in the family's history, the author's grandfather killed his wife, tried to hunt down his 4-year-old son (the author's father) and finally turned the gun on himself.

"Stranger Than Fiction" lives up to its title on the basis of that information alone. And Mr. Palahniuk can be seen exploring the links between real, scarring occurrences and the fictions they spawn. "The night I went to save my friend Kevin from a Xanax overdose is now Brad rushing to save Helena," he writes about a "Fight Club" scene with Brad Pitt. He also describes the film crew's work "building a rotting Victorian mansion for a million dollars."

He writes especially amusingly about the crazy incongruities created by the fictions of "Fight Club" and its fans' devout faith that the whole thing must be real. No stranger himself to blurring the border between truth and fiction, Mr. Palahniuk says that he promised to save the hair shaved off Mr. Pitt for the film and to send it to friends. He wound up trimming a golden retriever instead.

"Stranger Than Fiction" is an uneven collection in which the author visibly struggles with the demands of journalistic assignments. (Writing on deadline: "I'm sorry if this all seems a little rushed and desperate. It is.") But Mr. Palahniuk's candor and humor can get him through just about anything; each piece here is studded with small but priceless grace notes from an exceptionally droll and sharp-eyed observer. On the damage inflicted by wrestling: "About his nose, Ken Bigley says, 'Sometimes it's pointing left. Sometimes it's pointing right.' "

On why one man has created a homemade castle: "I don't know. Nordic heritage or whatever. I always had an interest in them. And it seemed like a good idea. Nobody else had one." From another castle cultist: "Rumor has it there's a basement dungeon under the tower, and I just let people keep thinking that." From a third: "I probably should have designed for a lot more closet space."

The slyly subversive voice of Mr. Palahniuk's fiction can be heard as he zeroes in on lines like those. This collection is as interesting for its insights into how that fiction takes shape, and for autobiographical glimmers, as it is for its ostensible talking points about submarines, rescue dogs or profile subjects like the writers Andrew Sullivan and Amy Hempel. Throughout the book he can be found formulating the kinds of neat, tricky locutions and singsong repetitions that turn up in his fiction.

He can also be seen struggling with endings just as he does in the novels, and opting for panaceas and generalities that smack of desperation. At one point here he suggests that war may become obsolete if it doesn't work as show business: "If we see that war 'tanks' after the opening weekend, then no one will greenlight another one."

But that feeble thought concludes an otherwise wonderful piece entitled "You Are Here," which is original to this collection. It describes a hotel ballroom where paying guests, would-be writers, get seven minutes apiece to sell their stories to agents, publisher and producers. "There's the stink of catharsis," he writes about the sales pitches. "Of melodrama and memoir. A writer friend refers to this school as 'the-sun-is-shining-the-birds-are-singing-and-my-father-is-on-top-of-me-again' literature." And as for the way to turn your life into a two-hour drama:

"Losing your virginity is the climax of your first act. Addiction to painkillers is your second-act build. The results of your biopsy is your third-act reveal. Lauren Bacall would be perfect as your grandmother."

He goes on to suggest that the ability to publish one's story may be "the new halo." Meanwhile, his own halo continues to shine.

Kindness (Ugh!) of Strangers

BOB MORRIS

New York Times (1923-Current file); Sep 26, 2004;
ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2007)
pg. ST3

THE AGE OF DISSONANCE

Kindness (Ugh!) of Strangers

By BOB MORRIS

The first-class cabin on the American Airlines flight leaving Heathrow in July was suitably hushed. Then along came my flight attendant, who remarked, when I ordered a second champagne, "Partying tonight, huh?" When she found out that I was a writer from Manhattan, she asked if I could get her an advance copy of a novel by her favorite author, which she was absolutely dying to read.

It was discomfiting, sure, but not exactly shocking. These days, after all, who doesn't have to face the easy, breezy invasiveness of strangers in service positions?

Salespeople at high-end stores who have a little too much to say about your shoes or haircut. Trainers at gyms who tell you where and when to eat and what movies to see. The owner of the bed-and-breakfast who told my nephew last week that there were no cartoons on the TV in our room because children are supposed to be doing their homework after 8 p.m. The dentist who asked a novelist friend of mine if she could get him a literary agent. Waiters who believe that touching customers, physically or emotionally, will result in higher tips.

When Chuck Palahniuk's novel "Fight Club" was being made into a movie, the woman driving him around Los Angeles on a book tour told him that she was also a music agent. Then she blasted one bad CD after another, hoping he'd give them to the director, until he finally told her to turn it down.

Call me a snob, but I like to be served quietly, even deferentially, especially when I am paying top dollar. The traditional approach, as laid out in the recently republished "George Washington's Rules of Civility" seems right to me: "Speak not til you are ask'd a Question," our first president wrote, "and Answer in a few words."

How far we've fallen. But what else can you expect at a time when bars are replacing banquettes with beds, makeover madness entitles anyone to offer opinions about you, and privacy is being invaded on all fronts, from phones that take and send pictures to the spate of humiliating new "Candid Camera"-like TV shows?

In his book "Sibling Society," Robert Bly suggests that our culture's unwillingness to acknowledge authority or to respect hierarchical divisions is a result of celebrity culture and parental permissiveness run amok.

"People are told to be very familiar without asking permission," said Stanley Crouch, the journalist, who bristles when strangers on the phone call him by hi his first name, because it reminds him of his childhood in a South where all black people were addressed informally. "We need new codes of behavior that are not necessarily stiff, but correct."

But is that possible when even airlines are encouraging the opposite? Mr. Palahniuk was sitting quietly in coach not long ago when a flight attendant who had seen his name on the passenger manifest leaned in very close and asked if "Fight Club" was really about gay men having sex in front of one another in bath houses. The impeccably polite author put a finger to his lips. "Don't tell anybody," he whispered.

Jaime Jewell, a former flight attendant who now trains staff members for Song, one of many airlines that now encourage humor and informality, said: "We don't impose hard boundaries on our staff. We want them to be who they are."

Even American Airlines, I was later told by a spokeswoman, wants its staff to be casual, although never obtrusive. But maybe sometimes they just can't help it.

"Flight attendants feel like their airplane is their living room," said Rosemary Griggs, a flight attendant for a major international carrier that she did not want to name. "We know the texture of the fabrics so well because we sleep on the seats between flights, and we just feel very comfortable in the environment."

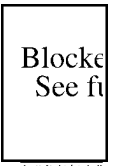
I guess that's why my flight attendant looked so relaxed when she sat in the first-class seat next to mine midway through my flight from London to give me her unsolicited assessment of the movie I had just finished watching. "I liked it," she said. "But I found it very disturbing."

So many things are these days, aren't they?

Paperback Row
IHSAN TAYLOR
New York Times (1923-Current file); Oct 31, 2004;
ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2007)
pg. A26

Paperback Row

THE MURDER ROOM, *by P. D. James. (Vintage, $13.95.)* James's 12th Commander Dalgliesh mystery preserves the element of old-fashioned, hair-raising intrigue as the dour poet-detective investigates a museum trustee's bizarre death (which resembles one of the notorious historical crimes showcased in the museum's most popular attraction, the Murder Room). Our critic, Patricia T. O'Conner, called this whodunit "James's most suspenseful, atmospheric novel in years" with "no shortage of surprise twists."



AMERICAN DYNASTY: Aristocracy, Fortune, and the Politics of Deceit in the House of Bush, *by Kevin Phillips. (Penguin, $15.)* Phillips, the author of "The Emerging Republican Majority" (1969), deplores dynastic politics, a phenomenon whose ideal example he finds not in the Kennedys but in the Bushes. Phillips finds the family's influence behind everything from the president's pursuit of Saddam Hussein to his administration's ties to the energy industry. Craig Unger, in **HOUSE OF BUSH, HOUSE OF SAUD: The Secret Relationship Between the World's Two Most Powerful Dynasties** *(Scribner, $15),* chronicles the ascent of two powerful clans — the Bushes and the royal family of Saudi Arabia — and argues that financial ties between the families feed the crisis in the Middle East.

QUICKSILVER: Volume One of the Baroque Cycle, *by Neal Stephenson. (Perennial/HarperCollins, $15.95.)* A sort of history-of-science fiction, this dizzyingly complex novel delves into the philosophy, economics and wars of the 17th and 18th centuries. The story involves, in part, the search for a man who holds the key to resolving an explosive scientific battle between Isaac Newton and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz over the development of calculus.

NIXON'S SHADOW: The History of an Image, *by David Greenberg. (Norton, $15.95.)* Thirty years after he resigned in disgrace, Richard Nixon remains a fascinating figure. Part biography, part anthropology, Greenberg's balanced exploration considers Nixon's life as it was lived and as it was —accurately and inaccurately — perceived, and credits him with the rise of image manipulation in American politics.

HEAVEN'S EDGE, *by Romesh Gunesekera. (Grove, $13.)* Exile and rootlessness lie at the heart of Gunesekera's fiction. This wistful, mysterious third novel is set in a distant yet unspecified future in the author's native Sri Lanka. The story follows a narrator's journey from England to his ancestral home — scarred by separatist civil wars — in search of a missing past.

FRANKLIN AND WINSTON: An Intimate Portrait of an Epic Friendship, *by Jon Meacham. (Random House, $16.95.)* Meacham, the managing editor of Newsweek, gives a graceful account of the bond between Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill, highlighting their similar backgrounds and shared passions (strong drink, high office), but also describing what made each man distinctive: "Roosevelt was the better politician. Churchill the warmer human being."

DIARY, *by Chuck Palahniuk. (Anchor, $13.)* Palahniuk delivers another absorbing thriller true to the spirit of his first novel, "Fight Club." Misty Wilmot, a lonely artist-turned-waitress, struggles to care for her family while her husband lies comatose after a suicide attempt. As apocalyptic messages are gradually uncovered in the homes her husband renovated on Waytansea Island, the community of blue-blood islanders, preoccupied with a dark legend, begins to take interest in Misty's artistry.

REAGAN: A Life in Letters, *edited by Kiron K. Skinner, Annelise Anderson and Martin Anderson. (Free Press, $18.95.)* Organized around themes such as "Hollywood Years and Friendships," "Foreign Leaders" and "Core Beliefs," this collection of more than 1,000 letters covers some 70 years of Ronald Reagan's remarkable life.

THE NIGHT COUNTRY, *by Stewart O'Nan. (Picador, $14.)* O'Nan's novel is inhabited by the ghosts of three Connecticut teenagers killed in a car accident on Halloween. While readers experience the story through these spirits, the focus is on the sense of doom that follows those left behind. O'Nan's descriptions, Charles Taylor wrote, "capture suburbia as the haunting grounds of teenagers and spooks, both of whom do their roaming after dark."

IHSAN TAYLOR

When Chekhov Meets Whoopee Cushion
DAVID HOCHMAN
New York Times (1923-Current file); Feb 27, 2005;
ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2007)
pg. H6

When Chekhov Meets Whoopee Cushion

By DAVID HOCHMAN

THE funniest show on Broadway this month might have been the one inside the third floor men's room of a McDonald's in Times Square. Around 1:45 p.m. on Feb. 13, Todd Simmons, a semi-employed actor, slipped off his long winter coat, which concealed a black tuxedo. He set out two silver trays with mints, gum, shaving supplies, cologne, condoms and other toiletries and stood alongside the diaper-changing station dispensing fancy soap and hand towels to dumbstruck customers.

"Have a pleasant day in our country," Mr. Simmons told a pair of excited British schoolboys, adding: "We're lovin' it. Hope you are, too."

Upon hearing that this was McDonald's "latest corporate promotion," a Japanese businessman asked if he could brush his teeth and told Mr. Simmons about "Mamma Mia!" ("I like the Abba songs," he said, "but the plot is very simple.")

Mike Kruger, a retired luncheonette owner from Flushing, Queens, was delighted but not shocked by the ritzy treatment. "We used to go to a Roy Rogers on Northern Boulevard that had a fantastic pianist," he said in the hallway after washing up. "But only McDonald's would do *this*."

The tale of a restroom attendant under golden arches sounds suspiciously like one of those alligator-in-the-sewers myths, which probably explains why reports of the incident have been spreading on the Internet. It happens to be one of more than 40 such stunts orchestrated around Manhattan by Charlie Todd, 26, an urban prankster dedicated to creating public scenes much like the hastily mobilized assemblies known as "flash mobs" of two summers ago, without so much as a simple "gotcha!"

These aren't the obnoxious humiliations known to fans of MTV shows like "Punk'd" and "Boiling Points" or "Da Ali G Show" on HBO. Like a number of like-minded but unaffiliated tricksters striking elsewhere around the country, Mr. Todd and his cohorts at Improv Everywhere, a performance art troupe he started, merely want to give people something to talk about.

"My primary motive is to create moments that are so astonishing, people will have a story to tell for the rest of their lives," Mr. Todd said over French fries after the McDonald's mission. Nothing would please him more than having those lads from England return home to tell everyone about "the butler who was passing out sweets in the loo."

Well, that and having his own reality series, of course. Mr. Todd came to New York from Chapel Hill, N.C., in 2001 to become an actor and he makes no secret about the fact that he would like to be his generation's Allen Funt. "I'm excited about the kinds of missions I could do with a larger budget," he said. Until then, his day job at an event marketing company allows him to cover the nominal costs of his zanier pursuits.

Mr. Todd awoke to the thrills of public put-ons a month after moving to the city when he bought a hip-looking plaid shirt at H&M and was told by friends that he resembled the singer Ben Folds, who is also from Chapel Hill. Mr. Todd decided to test the theory that night at Beauty Bar in the East Village by playing along when friends asked him for Mr. Folds's autograph. Within minutes, Mr. Todd was signing cocktail napkins and posing for photos with a gaggle of good-looking strangers at the bar.

"My other friends were doing Off Off Broadway shows nobody ever saw," Mr. Todd said. "But at the end of that night, I realized, 'Wow, I just performed for four hours, got free drinks, could have gone home with two girls, and had the time of my life.' "

Since then, the antics have gotten increasingly ambitious. Last year, Mr. Todd organized a "Meet the Writers" reading at Barnes & Noble in Union Square with Anton Chekhov. It didn't matter that the Russian dramatist died 100 years earlier. Mr. Todd found an old bearded guy with a K.G.B. accent, made up some realistic-looking posters and had the imposter read Chekhov's short story "In the Graveyard," with a few modifications to the text. The believing audience of around 25, half of whom were Mr. Todd's accomplices, sat spellbound.

It wasn't until Mr. Todd, who was moderating, opened the floor for questions that two security guards and the manager stepped in and politely asked the crowd to leave. "The manager told us to come back next time Chekhov writes a new play," Mr. Todd said. Undeterred, the group set up a book-signing in Union Square Park, where the so-called author sold 26 autographed copies of Chekhov's play "The Cherry Orchard."

"When you die, this is going to be worth lots of money," one proud young buyer told the playwright. Another apologized for missing Chekhov's play in Central Park the previous summer.

Perhaps the most ingenious scam is the one Mr. Todd calls the "Best Gig Ever." Last fall he found a struggling rock band with the worst performance slot imaginable and organized about 35 cohorts to greet them as though they were the Beatles.

When Ghosts of Pasha, a four-man band from Burlington, Vt., started playing at Mercury Lounge on Oct. 24, Mr. Todd's crew was ready with the lyrics memorized and the band's name scrawled all over their T-shirts, foreheads and arms. Electrified by the frenzied cheers and body slamming, they played as if it were their induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

"I just remember the whole ride home we barely said anything, it was so eerie," said Milo Finch, the band's lead singer, who said it was only the band's third public performance. "We didn't know what happened. Two days later, someone sent us an e-mail."

Mr. Todd's pranks don't end with a big reveal. Instead, he and his agents quietly disperse the incidents with photos and commentary on www.improveverywhere.com.

Mr. Finch said that reading about the con was a relief. "Prior to that it was just creepy," he said. "Now it made sense and I could finally appreciate what a memorable gig it actually was."

That sense of gratitude is the intended result, Mr. Todd said. "It's so much easier to go for the cheap shot and embarrass somebody," he said. "That night at Mercury Lounge, those guys believed they were rock gods."

Chuck Palahniuk, the author of "Fight Club" and a longtime member of the Cacophony Society of Portland, Ore., an underground group that organizes similarly random public stunts, said that what is unique about public acts like Mr. Todd's is "that people are providing spectacle with no expectation of getting anything in return."

Or, in sociological terms, when Mr. Todd brought together 40 people to dance on his cue at the listening stations at the Virgin Megastore in Union Square or when seven of his agents rode the No. 6 subway last month without pants while giving no indication that they knew each other, it was a benign form of norm violation. Mr. Todd is "breaking the unwritten laws of everyday life in the city to get people to appreciate the moment," said Harold Takooshian, Ph.D., who teaches urban psychology at Fordham University. "As long as he doesn't go dark — and these things can degenerate pretty quickly — this is urban humor at its best."

Although some New Yorkers have been chagrined to learn they'd been had, no one has tried to retaliate. "Sure, I blushed a little when I heard it was a prank, but how was I supposed to know what Anton Chekhov looked like?" said Robert Hain, who asked the faux-playwright to endorse a line of novelty magnets that he sells, only to learn months later that he had been had. Mr. Hain tells his side of the story at normalbobsmith.com. "I think it's more difficult to hoodwink New Yorkers than anybody, so I have to hand it to them," he said.

For his part, Mr. Todd said he merely hopes "to get people to turn off their iPods for a few minutes, which, believe me, is a challenge in a place like Manhattan."

The manager at McDonald's certainly took notice. After learning from his cleaning crew that a man in a tux was manning the lavatory, he decided to investigate.

"You're sure you got the right place?" he asked Mr. Simmons.

"Are there other McDonald's in the city?" Mr. Simmons replied.

"Yeah. Maybe you meant to go to 34th Street?"

"Could be," Mr. Simmons said. "That definitely sounds familiar."

They went back and forth with Mr. Simmons explaining that the promotion had kicked off in Akron, Ohio, and that perhaps the fax just hadn't arrived yet. The manager said he left a message with the corporate office but hadn't heard back. Then came an awkward pause.

"Well, you don't have authorization to be here," the manager said finally. "Do you need corporate's number?"

"No," Mr. Simmons said, as he prepared to collect his things. "I have corporate's number."

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SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT Todd Simmons, top, a member of Improv Everywhere, posed as a bathroom attendant at a Times Square McDonald's. Other events the group has staged include an annual subway ride without pants, above left, and a reading by "Anton Chekhov." The group's founder, Charlie Todd, inset left, says he just wants "to get people to turn off their iPods for a few minutes."

BOOKS OF THE TIMES

Not for a Full Stomach (Or an Empty One Either)

By JANET MASLIN

In his new ad hoc diet book, Chuck Palahniuk assembles two dozen of the most appetite-suppressing stories he can imagine. "Tell me a story to make me never want to eat, ever again," one character in "Haunted" requests — and, boy, does the author oblige. Mr. Palahniuk all but dares the reader to be seasick as he explores various forms of spiritual and literal putrefaction. If books had aromas, this one would reek of "old potatoes melting into a black puddle under the kitchen sink."

Here's how it works: "Haunted" is a string of gross-out fables, each accompanied by a prologue and a poem. Amazingly, in light of the book's subject matter, none of its characters are teenage boys trying to out-sicken their friends. Each of these one-dimensional figures has a repellent nickname ("Saint Gut-Free," "Missing Link," "Chef Assassin"), and they are trapped together for three months to express their creative impulses. Best case scenario: a grotesque latter-day artists' colony that will produce its own form of "Frankenstein." Worst case scenario: Donner party.

As it turns out, the Donner group's notorious cannibalism is small potatoes — small, rotting, black ones — compared to what "Haunted" will dish up. "We don't want you to die," one of the book's wittier characters says, "because we don't have a freezer." Fingers and toes begin to vanish; one woman is fed a cooked piece of her own buttock, made recognizable by its rose tattoo. Another woman's dead husband has been compressed into a three-carat diamond.

Oh, those wayward body parts: so detachable, so nourishing.

In this crowd, that qualifies as a lucky break.

When one teenage boy's effort to masturbate goes awry, he winds up with his lower intestine extracted from his body. Admirers of Mr. Palahniuk's envelope-pushing bravado will contort themselves no less painfully in trying to justify "Haunted" and its ugly overkill. As the author of "Fight Club," Mr. Palahniuk legitimately and brilliantly shocked readers, but he also opened the floodgates for wretched excess of a less inspired kind.

Like Neil LaBute and Todd Solondz, he can turn the revenge of the nerds into a bold feat of liberation. Or he can throw in one dead dog too many, which is what happens here.

The trouble with "Haunted" is not conceptual; the book's structure is viable, and some of its individual premises have their malevolent merits. But one of the better stories here, entitled "Slumming," illustrates what can go wrong. The story begins with a woman who has replaced her television with an aquarium containing a lizard to avoid watching the news.

"You flip the switch for the heat lamp," Mr. Palahniuk writes tautly, "and it's not going to tell you another transient wino was shot to death, his body dropped in the river, the 15th victim in a killing spree targeting the city's homeless, their bodies found stabbed and shot and set on fire with lighter fluid, the street people panicked and fighting their way into the shelters at night, despite the new tuberculosis." So we know why this woman has become a shut-in.

Haunted

A Novel of Stories

By Chuck Palahniuk

404 pages. Doubleday. $24.95.

Then it turns out that New York's charity ball elite ("imagine going to your senior prom every night for the rest of your life") has become similarly disaffected. "Social divers," a woman nicknamed Inky says, "are the new social climbers." Now the most chic of the rich and famous live like derelicts and are loving their new freedom. "Give up bathing until you stink, and just a hot shower feels as good as a trip to Sonoma for a detoxifying mud enema," the story advises.

It could and should end here. Instead, Mr. Palahniuk piles on the extras: a naked kidnapping victim, her severed ear, a police hunt for witnesses and the butchering of bag ladies. By the time he's done bludgeoning this tale it has lost its sharp edges. And this is a 400-page book, with 23 other nightmares where that one came from.

Too often, like Mr. Solondz's tactic in the film "Palindromes" of having the same character played by wildly different people, Mr. Palahniuk's underlying thoughts are startlingly simple-minded. "Exodus" is a grotesque foray into the recreational use of child-size, anatomically correct dummies. And it is written with the incisive brutality that accounts for Mr. Palahniuk's intense popularity. (About sexually abused children: "Every grass-stained knee, a clue."). But the author goes on to let this story turn to mush: the dummies represent the way we turn ourselves into objects and turn objects into ourselves.

Another shockingly told but ploddingly conceived story, "Speaking Bitterness," has a group of feminists denouncing male-perpetrated violence but raping the transsexual in their midst. The whole book ends just as fatuously, with the sudden, blue-sky notion that facing up to the monstrousness described in "Haunted" is a way of saving the world.

"Don't create shades of gray that a mass audience can't follow," one of the book's shut-ins advises, about the way these people can market their adventure some day.

Don't worry: "Haunted" is strictly black-and-white. Its most welcome extra flourishes are not dramatic ones; they are bizarrely medical, concerned with the minutiae of how living things grow damaged and decayed. Mr. Palahniuk can be eerily precise and knowledgeable about, say, exactly what happens to someone who swallows water at a temperature of 205 degrees Fahrenheit. He knows about nail fungus. Anyone wishing to know exactly how flies lay eggs on a corpse need look no further than this set of nightmare-laden bedtime stories.

Gore Values
TOM SHONE
New York Times (1923-Current file); May 22, 2005;
ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2007)
pg. F20

Gore Values

Chuck Palahniuk returns with a tale of writers holed up together, spinning stories of hard-core debauchery.

HAUNTED
A Novel of Stories.
By Chuck Palahniuk.
404 pp. Doubleday. $24.95.

By TOM SHONE

WHEN a story from Chuck Palahniuk's new book was serialized in The Guardian of London, it was flagged on the cover as "the most gruesome short story ever published," a come-on that tells you all you need to know about the allure of Palahniuk's work, which is best thought of as a close literary relative of NBC's "Fear Factor," in which contestants compete to see who can best retain their composure while being deluged with buckets of bugs. Opinion is still divided as to whether his *oeuvre* amounts to a tenacious attempt at reinventing the Gothic tradition for the 21st century, or a sustained, career-long attempt to put you off your lunch.

Palahniuk first came to light with "Fight Club" (1996), the story of a group of young men who seek to escape the numbing conformity of their 9-to-5 jobs by being beaten to a bloody pulp. It was made into a Brad Pitt movie, which must have really hurt, but Palahniuk recovered nicely, and was soon furthering his reputation with a series of fragrant odes to the milk of human kindness: "Survivor," in which a man dictates his life story into the black box recorder of a plummeting 747; "Choke," about a man who pretends to choke in restaurants and then emotionally blackmails those who attempt to save him; and "Lullaby," which gently broached the topic of infant genocide.

The new book, "Haunted," takes its cue from the old story about Mary Shelley, Lord Byron and friends holing up in the Villa Diodati during a thunderstorm and brainstorming the stories that would form the basis of "Frankenstein" and "The Vampyre." In Palahniuk's version, 17 writers answer an advertisement for a writer's retreat and hole up in a cavernous theater for three months to write their masterpieces. Any hopes, however, that what follows will amount to a searching drama of collective literary endeavor — egos clashing, fur flying, a sort of "Survivor" for the creative writing set — are immediately dashed by the discovery that all of Palahniuk's writers turn out fiction that bears a startling resemblance to the fiction of Chuck Palahniuk.

It's nothing but Chuck here, sliced and diced. In "Foot Work," one of several "colonic irrigation assassins" takes us on a tour of "the dark side of reflexology"; in "Post-Production," a couple shoot porn movies together to pay for the cost of raising a child ("instead of some old birthing video, someday they'd show their child his conception"); in "Guts," a young man manages to unspool most of his large intestine while masturbating on the bottom of his swimming pool. I hate it when that happens. Couldn't one of these aspirant literary geniuses have turned out to be — I don't know — an old-fashioned pastoralist, or a delicate minimalist in the manner of Raymond Carver? Instead they all go under mythico-thuggish names like The Earl of Slander and The Duke of Vandals, sport complexions the color of dog food ("red-raw meat around a nose and eyes, steak stitched together with thread and scars") and write stories whose themes range, in a timely tribute to the global compendiousness of Saul Bellow, from the queasily gynecological to the queasily gastrointestinal.

What would be really shocking, of course, would be if one of them turned out to be Anita Brookner. But then that would never do. The curious weakness of Palahniuk's neo-brutalist aesthetic is how hermetically sealed it must remain from anything that might challenge it: the air of hard-core debauch must be wall to wall or else crumble to nothing. Palahniuk's work has a tone of snarling X-rated confrontation, but reading his stuff is uncannily like being buttonholed by your younger brother and fed up to his bedroom so he can show off his book of Weegee photographs. Palahniuk's work feels raw but insular, angry but self-coddling, like a teenager's moods. The single most horrifying fact about "Haunted," though, is that his publishers have called it "a novel," which turns out to be a cunning euphemism for "a collection of short stories." The stories all follow much the same course. Palahniuk digs up some disgusting factoid; he devises a narrator to deliver the disgusting factoid; and then sits back to watch him or her deliver it. End of story.

ONE immediate side effect of this method is that "Haunted" remains stubbornly unscary. It burps up its shock moments with so little ceremony that the Gothic virtue of stealthily sidewinding suspense — the art of allowing a story to steal up on you before you even knew it was there — is left whistling in the wind. It's like Shelley without the sublimity: forget Frankenstein's mountain landscapes (there's virtually no scene-setting in "Haunted") and zero in on its autopsy scene, then stay there, nestling down amid the gristle, and you have the Palahniuk worldview. And boy does he never seem to tire of exploring that. "The first rule about fight club is you don't talk about fight club," proclaimed Tyler Durden, the antihero of Palahniuk's debut novel. "The second rule about fight club is you don't talk about fight club." Yet he proved sadly unable to stay true to his word. Talking about fight club — its ethos, its philosophy, its potential as a tool for personal growth ("Disaster is a natural part of my evolution") — was all anyone ever seemed to do.

As with J. G. Ballard's "Crash," the book's big, guilty secret was its tedious didacticism — forget the gore, it was the sheer amount of PG-rated philosophy on display that was truly disquieting — and much the same goes here: scratch one of Palahniuk's literary *stummtruppen* and another pair theo-fist or masochist wonk jumps out at you. "Any call for world peace is a lie," suggests one. "We love war. War. Starvation. Plague. They fast-track us to enlightenment." Such views place Palahniuk in a long tradition of high morbidity that links recent nihilists like Will Self and Bret Easton Ellis back to Ballard and William S. Burroughs, and beyond them, to the original literary Skeletor, de Sade — in whose writing a rolling disenchantment with the world is underpinned by a vivid, pimple-squeezing self-disgust. Like that of his predecessors, Palahniuk's world can feel dangerously bloodless and abstract: a lip snarl in a vacuum, wondering what to snarl at next. There aren't many requirements for the job of novelist — but a certain base level of curiosity about the world and empathy for the people in it don't hurt. Conversely, a Promethean intolerance for the everyday is not quite the winning ticket that Palahniuk clearly believes it to be. □

The themes of these neo-brutalist tales range from the queasily gynecological to the queasily gastrointestinal.

Tom Shone is the author of "Blockbuster: How Hollywood Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Summer."

TBR: Inside the List

CHUCK'S WAGON: Chuck Palahniuk's seventh novel, "Haunted," is No. 8 on this week's hardcover fiction list. It's an entertainingly gruesome book, and Palahniuk (it is pronounced POL-a-nick) has come up with some entertainingly gruesome ways to promote it. His well-choreographed readings will not remind you of Cynthia Ozick's. At bookstore appearances, Palahniuk likes to read a section of "Haunted" about people who are boiled to death in natural hot springs — but not before he has handed out teriyaki-scented air fresheners that make the local Barnes & Noble smell like the world's nastiest steakhouse. After that, he said in a telephone interview, "I bring the energy level back up by lobbing fake bloody, severed appendages into the crowd." (The fake-appendage plan went awry on his last tour when some of his bookstore visits nearly overlapped with those by Aron Ralston, the climber who wrote a memoir about how he amputated his own arm after it was pinned by a boulder. "He had a real sense of humor about it," Palahniuk said. "He said he wants them for his paperback tour.") Palahniuk ends his events by handing out, to those who ask him questions, rugs that resemble pieces of meat. His best-known novel is, of course, "Fight Club." There are always a few people who hang around after his readings to ask him how to find a fight club, or to invite him to the ones they've started. "I always say, 'No, thank you,' " Palahniuk said. "But I do sometimes ask them to show me their scars."

FRANKFURT'S SCHOOL: There are new No. 1 books on both the fiction and the nonfiction hardcover lists this week. On the nonfiction side, "On Bull—," by Harry G. Frankfurt (below), gets to No. 1 after bouncing around the list for 10 weeks. Frankfurt's book is not merely among the most unlikely best sellers thus far in the 00's; it is also the first No. 1 book in the history of the Times list to bear a title that this newspaper will not print in its entirety. On the fiction side, Michael Connelly's new novel, "The Closers," bumps James Patterson and Maxine Paetro's "4th of July" down to No. 2. If you don't count the novels by Palahniuk, Elmore Leonard and Alexander McCall Smith, there is only one quote-unquote literary novel on the fiction list — Isabel Allende's "Zorro," at No. 14. But bubbling just below, on the extended fiction list (available on the Web), the competition is fairly keen. Ian McEwan's "Saturday" is No. 19, followed by Marilynne Robinson's "Gilead" at No. 20. And the husband-and-wife team of Nicole Krauss and Jonathan Safran Foer continue to slug it out: her second novel, "The History of Love," is No. 25; his second novel, "Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close," trots behind at No. 30.

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(Pillow) Fight Club
Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times
New York Times (1923-Current file); Feb 19, 2006;
ProQuest Historical Newspapers New York Times (1851-2006) w/ Index (1851-1993)
pg. 39

Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

(Pillow) Fight Club

About 100 people, some in their pajamas, converged on Union Square yesterday afternoon and, at the blow of a whistle, took part in a giant pillow fight organized by an interactive public art group. Dozens of onlookers watched as the participants pummeled one another, sending feathers into the air.

AHEAD Book Fairs
BETH GREENFIELD
New York Times (1923-Current file); Oct 20, 2006;
ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2007)
pg. F2

Reading Might Not Be Dead

FOR BIBLIOPHILES The Miami Book Fair International lasts for a week and draws about 300,000 people.

By BETH GREENFIELD

LESS than half of the adult American population now read books that can be defined as literary, the Census Bureau reported after a 2002 survey. Yet the number of book fairs appears to be growing, so perhaps not everyone is eager to replace hard covers with hard drives after all.

"There are now 35 statewide celebrations, and that has gone up tremendously in recent years," said John Y. Cole, director of the Center for the Book at the Library of Congress. Mr. Cole arranges for authors to appear at the annual National Book Festival, which drew 100,000 literature lovers to the National Mall in Washington last month. The center also helps organizers put together local book fairs.

Several are scheduled next month, with the Miami Book Fair International the biggest and best known. The fair, held on the Wolfson Campus of Miami Dade College in downtown Miami, is a weeklong event that draws about 300,000 people.

"Our event is thriving, and I believe it's because of the other components we've added," said Alina Interian, executive director of the Florida Center for the Literary Arts at the college, which organizes the fair. In addition to providing space for 200 or so booksellers, the fair will have evening readings and spoken-word performances; a children's area with storytelling and entertainment; and international pavilions that bring together foreign-language books, art and performance.

But the authors are the biggest draw: 300 will read and participate in panel discussions this year. Frank McCourt, Thomas Cahill, Edward P. Jones, Arianna Huffington, Isabel Allende and Richard Ford are among the best known. Many others will read and speak in Spanish.

If it all seems like a highbrow disconnect to those who associate Miami with glitz and glamour, they may find an even bigger surprise in Las Vegas: the fifth annual Vegas Valley Book Festival, held in the shadows of the city's casino theme parks. Despite occasional past nods to local interests, in the form of sessions on poker or prizefighting books, the event has mostly drawn crowds (more than 5,000 are expected this year) by featuring "good, young fiction writers," the festival director, Kris Darnall, said.

This year's main speaker is Chuck Palahniuk, the author of "Fight Club." Others scheduled to read include the novelist Dan Kennedy and the best-selling nonfiction author Beth Lisick. Artists who will be at the festival include a prominent comics illustrator, Ben Katchor.

A TRAVELING event, the Latino Book & Family Festival, will be in Chicago in November after stops in Houston, Los Angeles and Dallas "We'll have Latino authors, books on Latino themes in both English and Spanish, and books for children and adults," the festival's director, Jim Sullivan, said.

A fair dedicated to younger readers, the Connecticut Children's Book Fair in Storrs, will bring together children's authors, illustrators and some popular characters, like Clifford, that big red dog.

In Wooster, Ohio, the 19th annual Buckeye Book Fair aims at all ages. Participants will include Karen Harper, a best-selling mystery writer and the author of "Hurricane," and Carl Sferrazza Anthony, who wrote "Nellie Taft: Unconventional First Lady of the Ragtime Era." At the Kentucky Book Fair in Frankfort, this year's celebrity host is the actress Patricia Neal, a Kentuckian and the subject of Stephen Michael Shearer's "Patricia Neal: An Unquiet Life." Local authors expected include Jim Archambeault and Joseph G. Anthony.

"State festivals tend to focus, rightly, on local writers," said Mr. Cole, who is happy for any excitement about reading that these events create. "In the electronic age, books and reading and authors really need promotion more than ever. The real competition now is not the computer per se, but for a reader's time."

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Databases selected: Multiple databases...

The New York Times

Woman Joins Fight Club

Vincent M. Mallozzi. **New York Times**. (Late Edition (East Coast)). New York, N.Y.: Jan 7, 2007. pg. 8.9

Abstract (Summary)

Amano, a 24-year-old writer and editor who lives in Nashville, trains in jujitsu and is a fan of mixed martial arts, which includes elements of kick boxing, jujitsu and wrestling. In jujitsu, a sport dominated by men, the 5-foot-6-inch, 115-pound Amano is a sight for swollen eyes.

In the past year, Amano and her father have traveled to a number of mixed martial arts events. In April, they attended the debut of the International Fight League in Atlantic City. In August, they went to a jujitsu seminar in Chicago given by Renzo Gracie, a Brazilian jujitsu star who is a mixed martial arts fighter and coach of the New York Pitbulls of the I.F.L. In September, they traveled to Moline, Ill., to watch I.F.L. bouts.

Kat Amano of Nashville and Renzo Gracie, a Brazilian jujitsu star who is a mixed martial arts fighter and coach of the New York Pitbulls. (Photo by Robert Caplin for The New York Times)

Full Text (766 words)

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On Christmas Eve, Kat Amano sat in front of a television at her father's home in Dallas. The Cowboys were playing the Eagles. Jimmy Stewart was playing George Bailey. But rather than turn to the football game or ''It's a Wonderful Life,'' Amano watched Pride Fighting Championships' ''Hardcore Knockouts Volume 3.''

''Have you seen it?'' she said. ''It's a great highlight reel.''

Amano, a 24-year-old writer and editor who lives in Nashville, trains in jujitsu and is a fan of mixed martial arts, which includes elements of kick boxing, jujitsu and wrestling. In jujitsu, a sport dominated by men, the 5-foot-6-inch, 115-pound Amano is a sight for swollen eyes.

''Whenever I go to a fight, I get double takes from a lot of guys,'' she said. ''But I've been into this sport my whole life. My father raised me on Bruce Lee movies.''

Amano's father, Jeff, holds a black belt in kung fu, a brown belt in judo, a blue belt in Brazilian jujitsu and a purple passion for martial arts that he shares with her and her siblings, Mandy, 28, and Brandon, 21, as well as their stepmother, Claire.

In the past year, Amano and her father have traveled to a number of mixed martial arts events. In April, they attended the debut of the International Fight League in Atlantic City. In August, they went to a jujitsu seminar in Chicago given by Renzo Gracie, a Brazilian jujitsu star who is a mixed martial arts fighter and coach of the New York Pitbulls of the I.F.L. In September, they traveled to Moline, Ill., to watch I.F.L. bouts.

Amano, who began taking kung fu lessons when she was 7, has a subscription to Ultimate Grappling Magazine and monitors three Web sites for news from the world of martial arts: sherdog.com, subfighter.com and mmaweekly.com.

''Kat is a hard-core fan, just like me,'' Jeff Amano said. ''When we are not at a fight, we're home watching one on TV.''

Amano spent last weekend tossing and turning in her father's living room, but she was not trying to sleep. Before friends arrived to watch mixed martial arts matches, father and daughter rolled out several mats and began practicing moves, including chokeholds, back flips and escape techniques.

''My father and I are always sparring,'' she said. ''It's a lot of fun.''

Amano said she finds other sports ''kind of boring.''

''I've tried to get into football,'' she said, ''but all I ever see is a lot of Ping-Pong, with the ball going back and forth, and a bunch of guys just running around.''

When friends tell Amano that all they see during mixed martial arts matches is one fighter sitting on top of another, whaling away while his opponent squirms to break free, she quickly takes a defensive stand.

''To someone who doesn't understand what they are seeing, it could seem boring,'' she said. ''But there is so much strategy and technique involved. Every move is like a chess move, and each of those moves could be countered with any one of several other moves.''

Amano, who writes for a music magazine in Nashville, Southeast Performer, also does editing for her father, who is a co-owner of Beckett Entertainment, a Dallas company that creates comic books.

Though she is taking a semester off as a graduate student at New York University, where she is working toward a joint master's degree in journalism and French studies, she is enrolled in jujitsu classes in Nashville, Dallas and Manhattan.

''There are about 12 students in each of those classes,'' she said. ''I'm the only girl.''

On Wednesday, Amano was back in New York visiting friends. She took time to sign up for a class at the Renzo Gracie Academy in Midtown. She had a chance to spar with him for a few minutes, the equivalent of a Yankees fan's tossing batting practice to Derek Jeter.

''I remember Kat from Chicago,'' said Gracie, who had stitches on his nose from a recent match. ''She was so technically perfect in applying her holds that day, that I just wanted to go over and congratulate her.''

Amano remembered their first meeting at that jujitsu seminar in August. She was practicing what she called a guillotine chokehold when Gracie told her, ''Nice work.''

''When he said that, my face got flush,'' she recalled. ''Just to meet Renzo was quite a thrill.''

[Photograph]
Kat Amano of Nashville and Renzo Gracie, a Brazilian jujitsu star who is a mixed martial arts fighter and coach of the New York Pitbulls. (Photo by Robert Caplin for The New York Times)

Indexing (document details)

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The New York Times

Under The Scaffold, A No-Fight Club

Allan Ripp. **New York Times**. (Late Edition (East Coast)). New York, N.Y.: May 13, 2007. pg. 14.3

Abstract (Summary)

"You guys are always here, standing around, bumping into people and fooling around," I scolded. "It's not the place, and someone's going to get hurt." I'm certain I cursed as well.

I jumped up as fast as I could, but I was unable to see or hear clearly -- my field of vision was violently distorted, and the inside of my head roared with vibrations. My jaw felt as if it had been moved three inches. But even through the static and pain, I could tell that my attackers were entertained by what had just happened. They yelped with laughter, and one kid made an exaggerated show for his friends, shouting, "It wasn't me!"

Later, when I spoke to some police officers near Columbus Circle, they were hardly encouraging. "Do you want to spend two hours talking with the detectives?" one of them challenged me. "Do you want to file a written report and description of the assault?" Since I couldn't identify which kid had actually clocked me, there was little I could do. They invited me to call 911 if I spotted the suspects. "We're not Columbo," one officer said.

Full Text (1198 words)

I WASN'T trying to be a tough guy. I was only trying to tell some surly kids to mind their manners.

They were hanging out, as they do almost every day at noon, around the scaffolding rimming my office building near Columbus Circle.

Although the scaffolding that is everywhere in New York marks work that is good for the city, these structures also create ad hoc hazards, especially when they attract swarms of teenagers under their shelter, counting chin-ups on the crossbeams and crowding around the entrance, oblivious of passers-by. Perhaps not so oblivious, since the teenagers who hang out near my office delight in blocking the way with their jostling and loitering. I've seen them spit at passers-by.

Normally I am adept at sidestepping them, but there was nothing I could do the other day when one of the kids shoved another into my chest while I was zigging past. It was the kind of move you expect in a crowded high school hallway between classes, which is surely where these kids belonged at that hour, instead of taking their game out onto a busy Midtown sidewalk.

I should have just put up my hands in a "no-foul" signal and walked on; the entrance to my office was barely 20 yards away. But I let the howling and snickering get to me, and so stopped to rebuke the boy who had flown into me.

"You guys are always here, standing around, bumping into people and fooling around," I scolded. "It's not the place, and someone's going to get hurt." I'm certain I cursed as well.

In an instant, I was surrounded by several of the boys, none of whom looked older than 15. The kid who shoved me just sneered while another told me to put my hands down and added a few choice insults. I looked more intently at the first one -- he was slight and baby-faced, and I thought I might be able to engage him with a fatherly stare. I started to offer him a handshake to see if that would elicit an apology. He looked back with utter contempt, which was the last thing I saw before I was hit in the head.

It was an explosive blow to my right ear and jaw, so fast and hard that it knocked me to the pavement. I later learned that I broke my right hand when I fell.

I jumped up as fast as I could, but I was unable to see or hear clearly -- my field of vision was violently distorted, and the inside of my head roared with vibrations. My jaw felt as if it had been moved three inches. But even through the static and pain, I could tell that my attackers were entertained by what had just happened. They yelped with laughter, and one kid made an exaggerated show for his friends, shouting, "It wasn't me!"

No one stopped or intervened. I'd like to think that was because it had happened in a blur and the scaffolding provides good cover for a mugging.

The whole gang stood there, challenging me to make a move. Instead, I staggered into the street and, overwhelmed with nausea and the ringing in my ear, sat down in the open doorway of a FedEx truck. A minute later, the pack was leisurely crossing west at 57th Street, catcalling back in my direction. Eventually, I made it to my office, where I spent much of the afternoon, wondering how much of a punch it took to induce brain damage.

Later, when I spoke to some police officers near Columbus Circle, they were hardly encouraging. "Do you want to spend two hours talking with the detectives?" one of them challenged me. "Do you want to file a written report and description of the assault?" Since I couldn't identify which kid had actually clocked me, there was little I could do. They invited me to call 911 if I spotted the suspects. "We're not Columbo," one officer said.

I am naturally drawn to conflict and often fantasize about stepping into a fray, sometimes armed like Bernhard Goetz, though mostly as a test of my wits and physical fitness. I grind out 350 push-ups every day and spend hours on the Lifecycle. But though I'm a capable fighter, no kid is going to let me warm up and stretch for 10 minutes before we get going.

Looking back, I realize that some of my moves in my 20s and 30s were fairly reckless. I once chased a purse snatcher through Central Park, warning I'd cut him with a knife I didn't have. (He actually dropped the purse.) I helped subdue a thug with a big radio who had punched another man on a Metro-North train, and I tried to outrun a group of muggers in Washington Square Park at 4 in the morning, until I slipped in the rain and was lucky enough to forfeit only my cash.

Most of the confrontations I encounter in middle age are the petty sort scripted by Larry David. A woman at the gym glowers at me after I beat her to the last unoccupied treadmill. I get thrown out of a movie theater for grabbing a bratty teenager who refuses to stop kicking my wife's seat. A neighbor holds the elevator too long with his country house belongings, and suddenly we're forever enemies.

Yet for some reason, getting jumped has not stirred the anger provoked by smaller slights; knowing that things could have ended up much worse has kept my rage valve in check. I might have turned my head and taken a direct hit to my frontal lobe, or someone might have plunged a knife into my back.

I DID get some measure of vicarious revenge through my friend Slam, who manages the overnight shift at the 24-hour gym where I often go at 3 a.m. to spin on the stationary bike. A cocky, stocky, head-shaven and neck-tattooed ex-felon, Slam regales me with tales of his rough-and-tumble past, like the time he paralyzed a member of the Aryan Brotherhood who came at him with a butcher knife, or the time he witnessed "Sammy the Bull" Gravano decked for daring to change channels in a prison TV room.

Slam recommended that I use the American Express defense when challenged again.

The what? I asked. In response, he produced from his pocket a sleek, quick-action razor with a mother-of-pearl handle, and proceeded to lift it ever so slowly in the air, as if actually ripping through solid flesh. "Don't leave home without it, brother," he said with a smile. I pictured my assailants laid out and gutted at my feet.

For various reasons, I didn't pass by the scaffolding outside my office for more than a week. Then one day I found myself approaching the fateful corner, where -- big surprise! -- a bunch of fellows in hooded sweatshirts were congregating at the usual spot. My pulse started to race. My broken hand throbbed. I thought about Slam's advice. I took a few extra breaths and did what I had to do: I crossed the street.

[Illustration]
Drawing (Drawing by Edel Rodriguez)

Indexing (document details)

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Gathering

RICHARD PERRY

New York Times (1923-Current file); May 2, 2007;
ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2006)
pg. B2

LENS

RICHARD PERRY

Gathering

It's the Friday night fights, of the video game kind, at NYClan, a place on West Fourth Street in Greenwich Village that is dedicated to devotees of such pursuits. Players in the Fight Club get together and compete far into the night at games like Virtua Fighter 5.

Other 53 -- No Title
New York Times (1923-Current file); May 20, 2007;
ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2007)
pg. G22

TBR: Inside the List

RALPH AND WRIGHT: "I wish I'd written that." It's a thought everyone has a couple of times a year, upon reading something particularly great. In the winter of 1952, the Book Review asked 12 writers with new books in stores to single out another book, published that year, that they wished they'd written. The answers bordered on the bizarre. John Steinbeck praised Al Capp's dialogue in his "Li'l Abner" cartoons. Tallulah Bankhead said she envied Adlai Stevenson's campaign speeches. Edna Ferber singled out her own novel "Giant." (C'mon, people.) Then there was Ralph Ellison, whose first novel, "Invisible Man," had been published earlier that year. The book Ellison said he wished he'd written was Wright Morris's novel "The Works of Love." This made a certain amount of sense; Morris was a forceful and worthy, if ultimately minor, writer. Ellison's pick made even more sense if you recalled that Morris had effusively reviewed Ellison's own novel in the Book Review, calling it "a resolutely honest, tormented, profoundly American book." As lit-crimes go, Ellison's back-scratching was barely a misdemeanor. But for more on Ellison's rough edges, see Brent Staples's review (Page 18) of Arnold Rampersad's new biography.

Ralph Ellison

NEGRO LEAGUE: Ellison clearly was more taken with Morris's review than with the one that appeared in the daily Times, written by Orville Prescott. Prescott, too, admired "Invisible Man." But his praise came with some awkward qualifications, at least to today's eyes. Prescott began by calling Ellison's book "the most impressive work of fiction by an American Negro which I have ever read." And he closed this way: "No one interested in books by or about American Negroes should miss it." Sounds like a candidate for the Negro best-seller list! There wasn't one. Ellison's novel spent 13 weeks on the Times hardcover fiction list.

NOTES: Christopher Hitchens's book "God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything" is new on the nonfiction list at No. 3. It's Hitchens's first book to appear here since his two-fisted attack on Bill Clinton, "No One Left to Lie To," had a four-week run in the summer of 1999. ... Michael Chabon's novel "The Yiddish Policemen's Union" is No. 2 in its first week on the fiction list. Chabon has had only one previous best seller for adults: "The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay" reached No. 16 for one week in 2001. ... The novel that put Chuck Palahniuk on the map, "Fight Club" (1996), never made the Times best-seller list, but almost every book he's written since has. His new one, "Rant," is No. 5.

BIG DADDY: A few weeks ago in this space, I wrote about a surprise best seller in England — Conn and Hal Iggulden's primer "The Dangerous Book for Boys." It's now out over here, and it's No. 2 on the advice list. There's a loose, funny video ad for the book on Amazon, set to a Ramones-like punk stomp. The ad's premise? With this book's help, you can a) rescue your son from the grim tyranny of video games, b) push him down a steep hill in the rattling go-cart you've just built together and c) find that your impressed wife actually wants to have sex with you again. That's a high heap of promises. DWIGHT GARNER

Best Sellers

FICTION

This Week		Last Week	Weeks On List
1	**SIMPLE GENIUS,** by David Baldacci. (Warner, $26.99.) Two former Secret Service agents investigate a scientist's murder while one battles her own demons.	1	2
2	**THE YIDDISH POLICEMEN'S UNION,** by Michael Chabon. (HarperCollins, $26.95.) A detective investigates the murder of a neighbor in a Jewish settlement in Alaska.		1
3	**THE CHILDREN OF HÚRIN,** by J. R. R. Tolkien. Edited by Christopher Tolkien. Illustrated by Alan Lee. (Houghton Mifflin, $26.) In Middle-earth, an evil lord wants to destroy his rival's children.	2	3
4	**THE WOODS,** by Harlan Coben. (Dutton, $26.95.) A prosecutor must confront family secrets when new evidence surfaces about a murder and disappearance at a summer camp 20 years earlier.	3	3
5	**RANT,** by Chuck Palahniuk. (Doubleday, $24.95.) The "oral biography" of a serial killer.		1
6	**ALL TOGETHER DEAD,** by Charlaine Harris. (Ace, $24.95.) Sookie Stackhouse, a New Orleans cocktail waitress, is swept up in the intrigue of a vampire summit.		1
7	**THE GOOD HUSBAND OF ZEBRA DRIVE,** by Alexander McCall Smith. (Pantheon, $21.95.) The eighth novel in the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency series.	4	3
8	**I HEARD THAT SONG BEFORE,** by Mary Higgins Clark. (Simon & Schuster, $25.95.) A woman marries a childhood acquaintance suspected of several murders.	5	5
9	**BODY SURFING,** by Anita Shreve. (Little, Brown, $25.99.) A woman takes a job as a tutor and becomes involved in a wealthy family's tensions and rivalries.	6	2
10*	**NINETEEN MINUTES,** by Jodi Picoult. (Atria, $26.95.) The aftermath of a high school shooting reveals the fault lines in a small New Hampshire town.	7	9
11	**BACK ON BLOSSOM STREET,** by Debbie Macomber. (Mira, $24.95.) More stories of life and love from a Seattle knitting class.	8	2
12	**THE RIVER KNOWS,** by Amanda Quick. (Putnam, $24.95.) In Victorian England, an investigative reporter and a wealthy Londoner feign a romance while they investigate a man they suspect of murder.	10	2
13	**FRESH DISASTERS,** by Stuart Woods. (Putnam, $25.95.) Stone Barrington, the New York cop turned lawyer, tangles with a mob boss.	9	4
14	**NO HUMANS INVOLVED,** by Kelley Armstrong. (Bantam, $20.) A necromancer struggles to free the trapped ghosts of six murdered children.		1
15	**DREAM WHEN YOU'RE FEELING BLUE,** by Elizabeth Berg. (Random House, $24.95.) Three Irish-American sisters in World War II Chicago.		1
16*	**KINGDOM COME,** by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins. (Tyndale, $25.99.) The final title in the "Left Behind" series.	11	5

NONFICTION

This Week		Last Week	Weeks On List
1	**AT THE CENTER OF THE STORM,** by George Tenet. (HarperCollins, $30.) The former director of the Central Intelligence Agency looks back on his career.		1
2	**EINSTEIN,** by Walter Isaacson. (Simon & Schuster, $32.) A biography based on newly released personal letters.	1	4
3	**GOD IS NOT GREAT,** by Christopher Hitchens. (Twelve, $24.99.) Religion as a malignant force in the world.		1
4	**ANIMAL, VEGETABLE, MIRACLE,** by Barbara Kingsolver with Steven L. Hopp and Camille Kingsolver. (HarperCollins, $26.95) The novelist and her family spend a year eating homegrown or local food; an argument for diversified farms and sustainable agriculture.		1
5	**PAULA DEEN: IT AIN'T ALL ABOUT THE COOKIN',** by Paula Deen with Sherry Suib Cohen. (Simon & Schuster, $25.) A memoir with recipes from the Southern cooking impresario (Food Network shows, restaurants, cookbooks, magazine).	3	5
6	**A LONG WAY GONE,** by Ishmael Beah. (Sarah Crichton/Farrar, Straus & Giroux, $22.) A former child soldier from Sierra Leone describes his drug-crazed killing spree and his return to humanity.	4	12
7	**WHERE HAVE ALL THE LEADERS GONE?** by Lee Iacocca. (Scribner, $25.) The former C.E.O. of Chrysler protests the lack of political and business leadership on issues like health care and energy policy.	2	3
8	**SILENT PARTNER,** by Dina Matos McGreevey. (Hyperion, $23.95.) The former wife of the former governor of New Jersey, Jim McGreevey, tells the story of her marriage to a man who resigned his office and came out as a "gay American."		1
9	**THE BLACK SWAN,** by Nassim Nicholas Taleb. (Random House, $26.95.) The role of the unexpected.	5	2
10	**KABUL BEAUTY SCHOOL,** by Deborah Rodriguez with Kristin Ohlson. (Random House, $24.95.) To aid Afghan women, an American runs a beauty school in Kabul.		3
11	**HOW DOCTORS THINK,** by Jerome Groopman. (Houghton Mifflin, $26.) A doctor and New Yorker staff writer describes how doctors arrive at diagnoses.	7	8
12	**I FEEL BAD ABOUT MY NECK,** by Nora Ephron. (Knopf, $19.95.) A witty look at aging from a novelist and screenwriter ("When Harry Met Sally").	11	40
13	**CRAZIES TO THE LEFT OF ME, WIMPS TO THE RIGHT,** by Bernard Goldberg. (HarperCollins, $25.95.) The author of "100 People Who Are Screwing Up America" attacks liberals and accuses Republicans of betraying conservative principles.	6	3
14	**BIG PAPI,** by David Ortiz with Tony Massarotti. (St. Martin's, $24.95.) From a childhood in the Dominican Republic to success as a Boston Red Sox slugger.	8	2
15*	**THE AUDACITY OF HOPE,** by Barack Obama. (Crown, $25.) The Illinois junior senator proposes that Americans move beyond their political divisions.	13	29

Rankings reflect sales, for the week ended May 5, at many thousands of venues where a wide range of general interest books are sold nationwide. These include hundreds of independent book retailers (statistically weighted to represent all such outlets); national, regional and local chains; online and multimedia entertainment retailers; university, gift, supermarket, discount, department stores and newsstands. An asterisk (*) indicates that a book's sales are barely distinguishable from those of the book above. A dagger (†) indicates that some bookstores report receiving bulk orders. Expanded rankings are available on the Web: nytimes.com/books.

Editors' Choice

Other recent books of particular interest

GHOSTWALK, *by Rebecca Stott. (Spiegel & Grau, $24.95.)* Stott's first novel, a mesmerizing intellectual thriller, connects a 17th-century alchemical cabal in Isaac Newton's Cambridge with outbreaks of post-9/11 violence.

THE BIG GIRLS, *by Susanna Moore. (Knopf, $24.)* A women's prison is the backdrop for the horrendous, intimate violence of Moore's novel.

IMPOSTURE, *by Benjamin Markovits. (Norton, paper, $13.95.)* In this novel, John Polidori, Byron's physician, becomes obsessed with the poet.

JOHN DONNE: *The Reformed Soul, by John Stubbs. (Norton,. $35.)* Stubbs's lively, dependable biography shows fearlessness in approaching the poet's "frequently convoluted" emotions.

ARE WE ROME? *The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America, by Cullen Murphy. (Houghton Mifflin, $24.)* A provocative effort to draw serious lessons from ancient Rome's collapse.

ANGELICA, *by Arthur Phillips. (Random House, $25.95.)* Old-fashioned phantoms give way to Freudian nightmares in this Victorian ghost story.

THE NEW YORKERS, *by Cathleen Schine. Illustrated by Leanne Shapton. (Sarah Crichton/Farrar, Straus & Giroux, $24.)* This novel's pets nudge their lonely owners into a redemptive herd.

COLLECTED POEMS FOR CHILDREN, *by Ted Hughes. Illustrated by Raymond Briggs. (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, $18; ages 8 and up.)* A poetic world with sharp teeth, claws and strange visions.

TAMAR, *by Mal Peet. (Candlewick, $17.99; ages 14 and up.)* A 15-year-old protagonist discovers the fate of two British-trained agents parachuted into wartime Holland, one of them her grandfather.

AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH: *The Crisis of Global Warming, by Al Gore. (Viking, paper, $16; ages 11 and up.)* Better organized than the adult version, with less focus on the author.

HURRICANE FORCE: *In the Path of America's Deadliest Storms, by Joseph B. Treaster. (Kingfisher/Houghton Mifflin, $16.95; ages 10 and up.)* A vivid account of hurricanes, starting with Katrina, which Treaster covered for The Times.

The full reviews of these and other recent books are on the Web: nytimes.com/books.

The New York Times nytimes.com

May 7, 2007

BOOKS OF THE TIMES

Appetite for Destruction: A Messianic Monster, Trained in Pain

By JANET MASLIN

Chuck Palahniuk's new novel, "Rant," takes its title from the noise made by children as they retch and vomit. The beautiful anatomical drawing on the book's cover depicts a heart, since a cow's heart appears in the novel as something used to make kids throw up. Details like these add up to an automatic deal breaker for anyone who has been tantalized from afar by Mr. Palahniuk's visceral fiction and wondered if "Rant" was the place to start.

RANT

An Oral Biography of Buster Casey

By Chuck Palahniuk

320 pages. Doubleday. $24.95.

But Mr. Palahniuk doesn't write for tourists. He writes for hard-core devotees drawn to the wild, angry imagination on display and to the taboo-busting humor at which he usually excels. The very outrageousness of "Rant" is supposedly part of its appeal. But Mr. Palahniuk has been walking a thin line lately. In this book and its unpalatable predecessor, "Haunted," his outrages feel perfunctory, and his new tricks are old tricks, executed by a writer recycling his best gambits for less and less coherent reasons.

So "Rant" is a mash-up of earlier, better Palahniuk sucker punches, with elements of his "Fight Club" especially conspicuous this time. This book, like that one, has a violent, ritualistic secret society and a shocking identity switcheroo at its finale. It also has the gallows humor and gleeful adolescent malevolence that can make Mr. Palahniuk so bleakly entertaining. But its ingredients feel arbitrarily slapped together, despite Mr. Palahniuk's ability to cast his malevolent fantasies in a visionary light. And this book's structure as oral history is a tactical misstep. It trades Mr. Palahniuk's scorchingly distinctive voice for a collection of flat and phony ones.

"Rant" begins with the alarming news that its title character grew up to be "America's walking, talking Biological Weapon of Mass Destruction." Rant Casey was a perverse small-town boy who grew up with an affinity for plague and pestilence, and learned to experience pain as a form of heightened awareness and a hedge against boredom.

Rant (that's his onomatopoeic nickname) had the habit, for instance, of sticking his bare foot into coyote burrows just to see what pain would be inflicted on him. "No matter the future, any terrible job or marriage or military service, it had to be an improvement over a coyote chomping on your foot," explains one of the book's many worshipful Rant fans.

Mr. Palahniuk, who has the temerity to throw in messianic overtones, gives Rant strange, preternatural talents. Some of these are schoolboy smutty, like the acute sense of smell with which Rant can trace used tampons and condoms to whoever discarded them. Others hint at a murderous yet exalted sense of mission.

Rant toughens himself by flirting with danger and getting bitten by scorpions, spiders, ants and snakes; he uses that cow's heart to startle the town's other kids into heightened awareness. "Rant Casey wasn't evil," says one of the many nondescript voices concocted to bear witness. "He was more like, he was trying to find something real in the world."

After Rant succeeds in catching rabies and cutting a swath of trouble through his town, he moves to a city and to wider possibilities for destruction. Now the book introduces its version of the Fight Club, a demolition-derby road game called Party Crashing. Dwelling on the particulars of this game ad nauseam, Mr. Palahniuk explains how participants dress up and outfit their cars in ritualistic, holiday-related gear: there are wedding parties, Christmas-tree collisions, events with fake babies or fake deer affixed to car roofs. When one of the book's talkier voices tries to analyze the symbolism behind all this, another, less erudite speaker speaks for us all as he asks, "Please, don't kill it with big words."

The same request might be made to Mr. Palahniuk. Whatever merits there may be to the light part of "Rant" — that is, the venom and rabies and fatal accident portion — are eventually glazed by an overlay of pretension. The car games become part of a system of oppression, with a privileged daytime population strictly segregated from the tougher, fatalistic nighttime underclass. The Christian parable buried in Rant's story becomes more and more brazen. Not for nothing is the same character given a trinity of names and a virginal teenage mother.

And just when this tower of piled-on ingredients seems to be at its wobbliest, Mr. Palahniuk adds the crowning contrivance: time travel. To translate this concept into Rant-ese, as expressed by one of his dimmer fans: "What if you found yourself a long time ago — by accident — and you met your own great-great-grandmother before it was wrong to date her? And what if she was a babe? And let's say you two hooked up? And how about she has a baby who'd be both your daughter and your great-grandmother?"

Or in the words of one of the more articulate speakers: "Picture time travel as nothing more than knocking your half-read book to the floor and losing your place. You pick up the book and open the pages to a scene too early or late, but never exactly where you'd been reading."

The trouble with "Rant" is not that these thoughts are so gratuitous or derivative; it's that they are delivered with so little conviction. Mr. Palahniuk's best books really do have mind-blowing twists and turns, to the point where the reader walks away from them in an altered state. They offer entrée into all-encompassing strange new worlds. But "Rant" lacks that kind of vision. Instead it carries a whiff of desperation, as if Mr. Palahniuk had ratcheted the fantasy stakes too high and strip-mined the same parts of his vast, fertile imagination too often.

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Demolition Man
FIELD MALONEY
New York Times (1923-Current file); Jun 3, 2007;
ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2007)
pg. G10

Demolition Man

Chuck Palahniuk is back, with the legend of a rabid folk hero who dies in a fiery car crash.

RANT
An Oral Biography
of Buster Casey.
By Chuck Palahniuk.
320 pp. Doubleday. $24.95.

By FIELD MALONEY

NOT long into "Rant" — 21 pages to be exact, after the car wrecks featuring impaled lungs and "severe internal exsanguination," after the torn-apart carcasses of mule deer and rabbits, after the black widow bites on human nether parts and the blood-drinking family dogs — the author describes the prairie storms that hit the little burg of Middleton, blowing over trash cans, strewing used condoms and panty liners and sanitary napkins (but nothing else, apparently) along the barbed wire fences on the edge of town. He zooms in — he can't resist — for a closer look: "Old blood and chunks so black it could be road tar. Blood brown as coffee. Watery pink blood. Sperm died down to almost-clear water."

A new Chuck Palahniuk novel has arrived! But don't think Palahniuk, the author of "Fight Club," is a garden-variety shock jock. This is the gross-out gone existential. This is about keeping it real. About staring down what one character in "Rant" calls "the fake ... nature of everything," and exposing our collective split jugular. "That night, even as a little boy, Rant Casey" — the country-boy hero of the new novel — "just wanted one thing to be real. Even if that real thing was stinking blood and guts."

"Rant" unfolds as an oral history of Buster (Rant) Casey by the people who knew him before (and perhaps after — the novel plays with fluid sci-fi notions of time) Casey drove off a bridge in a Cadillac with a flaming Christmas tree strapped to its roof. The novel is about the building of an urban legend: Casey is a dystopian folk hero who may or may not have been a serial killer. Of course, the rant is also Palahniuk's preferred method of fictional oratory: jazzy, digressive riffs mixing science, pop cultural detritus and slacker lore, cumulatively sketching out a bent, fallen world. At its best, Palahniuk's prose has the rat-a-tat immediacy of a bravura spoken word performance. When he misses, which he does often in "Rant," it's just overcooked and indulgent.

As a lad, Rant Casey likes to go "animal-fishing" — heading out into the desert to stick his bare hand down animal holes. "Didn't matter what critter — scorpion, snake or prairie dog — Rant would be reaching blind into the dark underground, hoping for the worst." No high like getting bit, Rant tells his pal Bodie Carlyle, whose hand has just been punctured clean through by jackrabbit chompers: "This here, far as I'm concerned, this is how church should feel."

Unsurprisingly, Rant contracts a wicked case of rabies, which he wantonly spreads through Middleton, an act that's either viral terrorism or liberation theology. (Rant preaches resistance to McSociety, which sometimes requires a little foaming at the mouth.) One character calls Rant Casey a modern-day Huck Finn, but what really comes to mind (and it's not the first time with Palahniuk) is Holden Caulfield gone goth: perpetual adolescence waging war on the phonies and squares. This point of view — which Palahniuk has a knack for expressing in bumper-stickerlike rallying cries — is catnip to preadults (these days, just about everyone under 45), which helps explain why his books are best sellers.

Soon Rant splits Middleton for the big city. Palahniuk can be impressively lyrical: here he describes Rant's parting, waiting with his father outside town for a bus to take him away. Notice the alliterative bursts and rhythmic cadences of the sentences, which mimic the sounds of cars racing by, and amplify the desolate pathos of the scene.

"A star blinks on the edge of the world, getting bright, blinding bright, growing so fast it goes past before you can hear the sound, the wind and dust of it — only a car, already come and gone. The headlights fading over the far side of the world."

The city, when Rant gets to it, is a nameless, postapocalyptic sprawl. It's run by fascist traffic planners who have segregated the citizenry into Daytimers (who move freely during daylight) and Nighttimers (an underclass of the destitute and otherwise misfit). Shoot-on-sight guards enforce curfew. Rant joins the Nighttimers (in the Palahniuk cosmos, salvation — or at least consolation — is always found among the leagues of the disaffected). He quickly falls in with the "Party Crashers," a sort of citywide impromptu demolition derby league organized around theme nights. For "Honeymoon Night," say, they all deck themselves out in tuxedos and wedding gowns and bridesmaid dresses, festoon their cars with shaving cream signs and cans strung to bumpers, and prowl around town at high speeds, looking for other costumed cars to rear-end. (For "Soccer Moms," pennants and booster uniforms; and so on.)

Rant's girlfriend, Echo Lawrence, describes her first Party Crash, pursuing a mock deer hunter in camos, with a Styrofoam buck on top of his sedan. "Chasing him, I forget I have a bum arm and leg. I forget that half my face can't smile. Chasing him, I'm not an orphan or a girl. I'm not a Nighttimer with a crummy apartment. The deer ... dodges through traffic, and that's all I see." It's fitting that Echo, Rant's true love and the novel's heroine, is beautiful but disfigured. For Palahniuk the morbid aesthetic has devolved past cool-cat pose into reflexive tic.

The problem with collecting and sentimentalizing freaks, though, is that they get reduced into cute caricatures. And the specter of cuteness has always dogged Palahniuk; even at his most grisly, it's like watching Gene Simmons spit blood and breathe fire onstage. (Tellingly, Palahniuk has been known to respond to fan mail with care packages of toy animals and severed plastic limbs.)

Even his admirers may be disappointed by "Rant." As a project, it has a dialed-in, flabby air. The sci-fi conceits are derivative and give the plot a hoary implausibility (and I'm not even addressing his "Michael Crichton for the Utne Reader set" conspiracy theories about Henry Kissinger, AIDS and Africa). Palahniuk has always been more sensation artist and cultural vacuum than storyteller. His characters aren't developed so much as given colorfully grotesque and morbid mannerisms and back stories. Sometimes he gets away with this by force of an assured voice and a febrile imagination: "Fight Club" had a cold stylish gleam; at some level its fantasies seduced. Take that away and all that's left is shock as shtick. □

Palahniuk, the author of 'Fight Club,' isn't a garden-variety shock jock. This is the gross-out gone existential.

Field Maloney is writing a book about wine in America.

November 2, 2007

Mayhem Poets

By LAUREL GRAEBER

MAYHEM POETS When Scott Raven Tarazevits, above right, proclaims from the stage of the New Victory Theater -- an enterprise devoted to family audiences -- how much he loves breasts and thighs, you may be tempted to cover the ears of the child sitting next to you. But it soon becomes clear that this isn't necessary. The juicy breasts and thighs Mr. Tarazevits is drooling over are the kind found at a barbecue, not a brothel. And before long his onstage compatriots, Kyle Sutton, above left, and Mason Granger, have leapt into the audience, busily flapping and clucking their accompaniment.

Mr. Tarazevits's ode to chicken is just one of the ways that he, Mr. Sutton and Mr. Granger, collectively known as Mayhem Poets, subvert expectations. Although their spoken-word performances derive from hip-hop, their material wouldn't make your grandmother blush, and there's nothing gangsta about their pose. (Their message is to write, not fight.) Having met several years ago as students at Rutgers University, the young men have said that their name is a play on the world-domination Mayhem Project mentioned in the film "Fight Club." But their only weapon is words, specifically the snappy, streetwise art known as slam poetry.

And they deploy it brilliantly, using images from the silly ("My face was so purple I must have looked like Barney having a baby") to the serious ("Stay together in this human race"). Calling young volunteers onstage, they demonstrate that poetry can be made by a line of people, each contributing one word, or -- if you believe that poems can be nonverbal -- each performing one action. Their intent, as they show in one long, rhapsodic riff, sitting as if in "a lime green limousine" that then morphs into a plane, is to prove that with imagination, "we can go anywhere." It's an amazing ride. (Tonight at 7, tomorrow at 2 and 7 p.m., Sunday at noon and 5 p.m., 229 West 42nd Street, Manhattan, 646-223-3010, newvictory.org; $12.50, $25 and $35.)
LAUREL GRAEBER

November 25, 2007

Movie Deals

By RACHEL DONADIO

It's high season for Oscar bait, and multiplexes are filled with literary adaptations, including the Coen brothers' bloody take on Cormac McCarthy's "No Country for Old Men" and Mike Newell's film of Gabriel García Márquez's "Love in the Time of Cholera." Coming later this fall are big-screen versions of Ian McEwan's "Atonement," Philip Pullman's "Golden Compass" and Marjane Satrapi's "Persepolis," among others.

Literary writers have gone west in search of greater fame and fortune at least since the days of Hemingway and Fitzgerald, and books have long inspired films. But today, some publishers are going directly into the movie business themselves. Last month, HarperCollins, a division of News Corp., announced a partnership with Sharp Independent to develop movies based on HarperCollins books. Meanwhile, Random House Inc. has teamed up with Focus Features to co-produce two to three movies a year based on fiction and nonfiction from its dozen imprints. Its first collaboration, "Reservation Road," directed by Terry George and based on John Burnham Schwartz's 1998 novel, played in theaters this fall.

These partnerships give publishers a bigger piece of the action than traditional film rights deals, which generally bring them little more than a publicity boost for tie-in editions. Now, Random House and HarperCollins will get a cut of the box office sales, as well as revenue from DVDs, cable TV and other media. And the authors involved will get more say in choosing screenwriters, actors and directors.

Some worry that the increasingly cozy relationship between Hollywood and publishing companies is changing expectations of literary success — and may even be changing the way novelists approach their work. These days, "most writers feel a book isn't worthy unless it's made into a film," Annie Proulx said in June at a literary festival in Capri, discussing the experience of having her short story "Brokeback Mountain" adapted for the big screen. "I think people are writing their books with an eye toward wanting them to be made into a film," she said, a development she found "dispiriting." But interviews with a number of novelists who have worked with Hollywood suggest that the situation may be more complicated, and that the process might have given them not just a big payday but some helpful insights into storytelling.

Novelists and the movie business haven't always been so friendly. "When I first went out to Hollywood I got the sense it was better not to mention I was a novelist," said John Sayles, who published stories in The Atlantic Monthly and wrote a novel, "Union Dues," that was nominated for a National Book Award in 1978 before he became a screenwriter and director. In addition to directing his own scripts for films like "Matewan," "Lone Star" and "Honeydripper," coming in December, he has written some 40 screenplays for other directors. Studios, Sayles quickly learned, saw novelists as "those pesky people who complain about the movie after it's made or 'make us waste $100,000 writing the first draft before we get a professional to take

care of it.'" A lot of novelists, he said, "just take the money and run, or a lot of them take the money and complain."

These days, Sayles said, his fiction writing is just a "hobby," as well as a place to experiment. A novel allows for many different points of view, he noted, while in film, there are basically three: omniscient ("the shot of the house from the outside at night"), the protagonist's ("in the closet as the chain saw cuts through") and the antagonist's ("through the hockey mask of the crazed killer"). And novels can expand where film has to compress. Right now, Sayles is writing a book that started as a screenplay — until he realized he'd never raise the money to produce something set in the Philippines during the Spanish-American War. ("I need a good Writers Guild strike to get a novel done," he said.)

Other novelists say film work has given them a different sense of narrative possibilities. Schwartz, who wrote the screenplay for "Reservation Road," said film writing had had a "disinhibiting" effect on his fiction, inspiring him to cut between scenes in a "slightly more aggressive" way. Michael Ondaatje, whose novel "The English Patient" became an Oscar-winning film, said his own experience on several documentary projects had taught him about the power of seemingly small decisions. "I recognized how intricate and microscopically small the art of editing is," he said. "You cut something that's the twentieth of a frame and you can make a difference in the pacing."

Diane Johnson, whose novels include "Le Divorce" and "Le Mariage," said her screenwriting work had given her a stronger sense of structure. Stanley Kubrick, who hired her to write the script based on Stephen King's novel "The Shining," was an elaborate outliner. His insistence on "getting the structure in place before you actually move to the details of a scene carried over into novel writing in a good way," she said. "I'm not sure that novel writing in turn helps you as a screenwriter," she added. "I think it's more the other way."

A film deal also helped Tom Perrotta's career as a novelist, if not quite in the way some detractors think. When his novel "Election" was published in 1998, he said, "I got a lot of reviews that said, 'He wrote this to be a movie,'" an idea he calls "laughable." In fact, he had written the book years earlier, but it sat in a drawer until someone connected him with a film producer, who showed it to the director Alexander Payne, who optioned the film rights, which in turn led to a book contract. Since then, he's had no trouble having his novels published — or filmed. He was a co-writer of the screenplay for the film based on his novel "Little Children" and has also been hired to write the film version of his new novel, "The Abstinence Teacher." "Writing screenplays," he said, "has the paradoxical effect of making me a more literary writer, much more conscious of what I can do in a novel that I can't do in a script: the ease of a flashback within a flashback, how you can have immediate access to any event in your character's life."

Some writers, however, insist that having their novels turned into movies has hardly affected their writing at all. "I make work that is pretty resistant to being filmed, and if the film community cares to try, that's fine with me and indicates fortitude on their part," said Rick Moody, whose novel "The Ice Storm" was adapted by Ang Lee. "But I don't think about the movie business while I am composing novels and stories." Although he was in touch with the director and producer during filming, Moody said he tried to follow Hemingway's advice, which he summarized as follows: "Drive to the border of California, throw your book over the fence. When they throw the money back over the fence, collect the money and drive home."

Chuck Palahniuk also says he's happy just to sit back while the filmmakers do their work. Palahniuk was working as a mechanic when his 1996 novel "Fight Club" was made into a film directed by David Fincher. "I

only quit my job ... because my phone rang with personal calls all day, and I couldn't get my real work done," he said in an e-mail message. "On the day 'Fight Club' started filming, my agent sent dozens of white roses to the garage where I worked — that kind of botched my standing among the other mechanics." In August, he traveled to New York to watch Clark Gregg shoot a film based on his novel "Choke." "It was interesting to see everyone's interpretation," Palahniuk said. "Beyond that, I ate my weight in location catering and ogled during the nude scenes."

In a recent essay for Nextbook.org, Bruce Jay Friedman summed up what may be the healthiest attitude to the hit-or-miss fiction-to-film experience. He loved "The Heartbreak Kid," Neil Simon and Elaine May's 1972 adaptation of his story "A Change of Plan," about a man who falls in love with another woman on his honeymoon. But he hasn't yet seen the Farrelly brothers' remake, which stars Ben Stiller and was released last month. "Once again," Friedman wrote, "there is very little for me to do except to watch the movie, take full credit for anything that's exceptional, and to deny involvement with any parts that aren't."

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Gladiator

By PAUL WACHTER

Shortly after he was released from California's Avenal State Prison in early 2005, Shad Smith got a call from the organizers of an underground fight club called Felony Fights. Was he available? they asked. "I was just out of prison and out of money," Smith told me recently. He was incarcerated for failing to comply with the probation terms of an earlier D.U.I. conviction, a relatively minor offense in his long criminal résumé. "They said they'd give me 800 bucks to show up and double that if I won."

Most fighters who appear in Felony Fights are ex-convicts, but few are professionals. Smith was: he fought in sanctioned bouts for King of the Cage and several other second-tier mixed-martial-arts organizations that have sprung up in the past few years. For Smith, taking on an untrained, would-be tough guy seemed like easy money.

The fight, which appears on a DVD, "Felony Fights 3," that is available in shopping malls throughout the country, was held in a small concrete lot, only 100 yards or so from an unidentified beach. On the video, Smith's opponent, a lanky self-proclaimed street fighter named Mike, pops in his mouth guard, and the two men both shirtless and heavily tattooed raise their fists. Mike throws a couple of kicks and then a series of straight punches, and Smith counters with a few jabs of his own. Neither one connects, and the crowd of about a dozen urges the two men on, saying "get him" and "swing with him."

When Mike closes the distance, Smith tackles and quickly straddles him, pinning Mike's hips down with the weight of his body. M.M.A. fighters call this position the "full mount," and Mike is helpless, able only to flail his arms wildly as Smith rains down punches and slams his head into the concrete. Mike's mouth is bloody now, and the encouragement of the spectators grows louder and more profane.

But it's what happens next that separates this fight from the rest of the Felony Fights oeuvre. Instead of beating Mike into unconsciousness and then doing worse, Smith stops throwing punches. "I don't want to keep punching him," Smith tells the crowd. Of his own accord, he gets up and walks away.

The founder of Felony Fights, Michael Lynch, an ex-con himself, follows Smith to find out why he stopped. "This is permanent," Smith is heard saying. "You understand this is permanent, right? There is a point where the fight is over."

Smith is used to taking part in state-sanctioned events. They're often brutal, but there are rules. Referees step in when a fight gets out of hand. But Felony Fights is not sanctioned, and there are no rules.

Mike, in the video, is standing now, swigging from a gallon jug of water and consulting a friend. "He's a wrestler," the friend says. "Don't go down on the ground with him."

Meanwhile, Lynch is urging Smith to continue. "I don't think you did any permanent damage on him," Lynch says.

“I will, that’s what I’m saying,” Smith replies. “Broken noses, broken cheek bones and stuff — think about it.”

But no one does. Already, Mike is approaching, popping his mouth guard back in. The two fighters square up again. Smith lands a couple of left hooks and then a right that almost topples Mike. Once more, he scoops up Mike’s legs and slams him to the ground. This time, he brings down his elbows. “Smash him!” someone yells from the sidelines.

“Are you done?” Smith asks.
“No,” Mike says.
More punches. “Are you done?”
“No.”
More elbows. Mike’s right eye is swelling up.
Finally, Lynch steps in. “All right, we’re done. We’re done.”

UNTIL RECENTLY, professional fighting in the United States was confined to the boxing ring and the theatrical gimmickry of wrestling. But in 1993, the Ultimate Fighting Championship was born, featuring the mixed martial arts — a blend of boxing, wrestling, jujitsu and other disciplines. At first, the new sport was likened to “human cockfighting” and attacked by lawmakers, but thanks to a few rule changes and savvy marketing, mixed martial arts now outearns boxing and wrestling in pay-per-view revenue. As professional M.M.A. — which includes not just the U.F.C. but also tens of smaller organizations that adhere to the same rules — has gone mainstream, however, other, unregulated forms of fighting have emerged in its shadow, offering greater levels of violence. Felony Fights is the most extreme of the lot, and Lynch, its founder, is quick to distinguish its fights from state-sanctioned events. “A guy can train in a gym forever, but he doesn’t know what to do when a guy bites his face,” he says. The company’s fights can be found on YouTube and other Internet sites, but they have also made their way into Best Buy, Sam Goody and other megastores with little fanfare or controversy.

Shad Smith is the rare fighter with a foot in each of these violent worlds. I first spoke to him by phone last summer, the day after he fought to a draw in a state-sanctioned King of the Cage competition in San Jacinto, Calif. He kept the conversation short, saying he was loopy from the fight. But we eventually talked a few more times, and finally in December he invited me to his home in Grand Terrace, a middle-class community of 12,000 along Southern California’s I-215 corridor, a few miles west of San Bernardino.

We met at a sushi restaurant near his home, and when I arrived Smith was already sipping a beer and watching a Bengals-49ers game. The first things I noticed were the tattoos on the back of his skull, but Smith’s roughneck look is diminished somewhat by his size — he stands 5-foot-5 and weighs 155 pounds — and his easygoing manner.

“I’ve been a fighter my whole life,” said Smith, who is 35. He was born in Cincinnati, but his family moved to San Bernardino on his 8th birthday. They were poor. His father worked an assortment of jobs, including preacher and small-time professional boxer. He taught Smith and three of his brothers how to handle themselves and took them to the local Boys’ Club for boxing lessons. They were the only white kids, Smith said, and the Latinos and African-Americans at the club teased them about their Midwestern accents.

But most of Smith’s childhood fights took place outside the ring, on the streets and at his instigation. He used to wear his hair in a mohawk as a tribute to the professional tag-team wrestlers the Road Warriors and prowl

the neighborhood looking for fights. “I was just mad-dogging everyone” — staring them down — “until somebody said something, and then I’d put my hands up and start fighting.” He said he had 46 counts of assault and battery as a juvenile. “And that’s 46 counts posted on me. Can you imagine how many there actually were?”

I asked Smith why he spent so much of his youth looking for trouble. I expected some sort of clichéd, though possibly true, explanation — a difficult childhood or a Napoleon complex. What I didn’t expect him to say was, “You know, bro, the sexual-preference thing.”

Smith is gay, and I know of no other professional fighter who is openly so. “I was always scared that my mom and dad would find out and wouldn’t like me, and my brothers wouldn’t like me,” he said. “I was petrified, because I didn’t want anyone to find out. And I would try to be the toughest person around. That way, no one would suspect, no one would ever say it, no one would think it.”

On Nov. 12, 1993, the Ultimate Fighting Championship made its debut in Denver, billing itself — much as Felony Fights does now — as a no-holds-barred brawl. In fact, there were a few rules — no eye-gouging, no biting — but victory, according to the promoters’ hype, could be earned only by “knockout, surrender, doctor’s intervention or death.” There were no weight classes and no gloves. The basic conceit of the early fights, held in an octagonal cage, was to answer the eternal adolescent questions that served as the basis of Jean-Claude Van Damme’s Hollywood career. Could a boxer beat a wrestler? How about a kickboxer versus a judo champion?

The sport’s immediate influence was Brazilian *vale tudo* — “anything goes” in Portuguese — but the U.F.C.’s owner, a pay-per-view production company called Semaphore Entertainment Group, invoked the spirit of Roman gladiators in its marketing. A more accurate historical parallel is *pankration*, the most popular event of the ancient Olympics. “*Pankration* was a savage all-out brawl, where only eye-gouging was banned,” Tony Perrottet writes in “The Naked Olympics,” his popular history of the ancient games. “The more brutish participants would snap opponents’ fingers or tear out their intestines”; the judges approved of strangling. Some competitors accepted death rather than surrender.

Many regarded ultimate fighting as barbaric. Among them was Senator John McCain, who helped persuade dozens of states to ban events and major cable pay-per-view providers to stop showing them. For a few more years, the organization sputtered along as the owners tried to appease their critics, introducing gloves and a few more rules — no hair-pulling and no kicking the head of a grounded opponent among them — while courting state athletic commissions. In late 2000, New Jersey became the first state to hold a sanctioned mixed-martial-arts event. But it was too late for Semaphore, which, facing bankruptcy, sold U.F.C. the next year for $2 million to a company owned by two casino executives. A small-time boxing manager, Dana White, was put in charge.

The new owners quickly turned the U.F.C. around, successfully lobbying more states, including Nevada and California, to sanction its bouts. But the smartest move was getting the cable channel Spike TV to make a reality show, “The Ultimate Fighter,” featuring bouts between up-and-coming fighters. The show caught on, gave the sport new exposure and helped drive pay-per-view buys of the main events.

“We saw the U.F.C. as a sport with great athletes, and that was what we promoted,” says White, the U.F.C. president, distancing himself from the previous owners, who, he says, promoted carnage above all else. The

U.F.C.'s makeover has mollified most of its critics. Even Senator McCain has come around. "They have cleaned up the sport to the point, at least in my view, where it is not human cockfighting any more," he said recently in an interview with National Public Radio. "They haven't made me a fan, but they have made progress."

Last August, I visited the Mandalay Bay casino in Las Vegas to see just how sanitized the new U.F.C. has become. The place was packed for the latest event, a group of bouts called UFC 74. In the marquee fight, Randy Couture, an Army veteran and three-time Olympic alternate in Greco-Roman wrestling, successfully defended his heavyweight title. Early in the first round, the 44-year-old champ managed to lift his younger, heavier opponent, Gabriel Gonzaga, and slam him to the mat. Blood began to gush from Gonzaga's nose, and he never fully recovered. Later, in the postfight press conference, Couture said he had inadvertently crashed his forehead into Gonzaga's face. He heard Gonzaga's nose crunch.

It was not the evening's bloodiest fight. That distinction belonged to the final undercard bout, just before the pay-per-view broadcast began. The crowd favorite Renato Sobral, from Brazil, took on David Heath, an unheralded American. In the beginning of the second round, after Sobral wrestled his opponent to the ground, one of his punches opened a gash on Heath's forehead. Soon both fighters were drenched in Heath's blood, which pooled on the mat, and from my seat in the second row it appeared as though a crimson fog had descended over the octagon.

Whenever the referee edged closer, looking to stop the fight, Heath, on his back, threw a few halfhearted punches. So Sobral switched strategies by applying a choke hold to Heath's neck and beginning to cut off his oxygen supply. It's a common ending to M.M.A. fights, and Heath, recognizing his hopeless position, tapped Sobral's arm several times. The "tap out" is how fighters signal their surrender, like chess players knocking over their own kings, and there is no shame in the act. The referee tugged at Sobral's arm. But Sobral didn't release his grip for several more seconds; when he finally stood up in victory, Heath's entire body fluttered. He had passed out.

Suddenly the crowd, which had been behind Sobral throughout the match, started to boo. Sobral, in a winner's gesture, threw his baseball hat out into the crowd. A fan picked it up and flung it back toward the ring.

In an instant, the crowd turned. It hailed Sobral as he beat Heath bloody, but the drawn-out choke hold was seen as unsportsmanlike and truly dangerous. Heath, who took a minute to recover, left the auditorium to applause.

So it was not surprising when, several weeks after the fight, Sobral was kicked out of the U.F.C. — the owners' latest bid for mainstream acceptance. But as they try to make the U.F.C. safer, more palatable, there are some fans who believe the sport is moving in the wrong direction. At the Mandalay Bay that evening, after all, several hundred people kept cheering for for Sobral.

FOR MOST OF M.M.A.'S early years, Shad Smith was oblivious to the sport — he was in prison. In 1995, he was arrested for carjacking and began a four-year sentence, the first and longest of several stints in prison. But just days after he got out, Danny Caldwell, the brother of a childhood friend, told him he had arranged a fight for Smith. Caldwell, an M.M.A. enthusiast, was a co-founder of Tapout, a clothing company that sponsors fighters. "I'm like, Whatever, I'm still partying, partying like a rock star," Smith said. "Three weeks

later, they show up at my house."

Smith made his M.M.A. debut on Jan. 22, 2000, in San Diego at an event called Caged 2000. "I'd never been in any cage fights or anything," Smith said. "Not even as a spectator, much less as a competitor." But he did well, choking out his opponent in the first round. Over the next seven years, he fought for several organizations, compiling a record of nine wins, eight losses and two draws — a journeyman's résumé, which might have been more impressive but for a couple of stints back in prison.

For his troubles in the cage, Smith can expect to earn, at best, about $4,000 a fight, and he fights only four or five times a year. He supplements his income by teaching M.M.A. classes at local gyms, something he intends to do more of when he retires. But he also accepts the occasional underground match, typically a backyard affair, where the winner takes home $1,000 or so. "I have a whole tape of my fights," he said as we finished our dinner at the sushi restaurant. He offered to show me.

We drove back to Smith's modest-but-roomy single-story home, which he shares with his boyfriend. Recently, his parents, one of his brothers and a niece moved in — despite Smith's adolescent fears, his family seems now to fully accept his sexual orientation. We walked into the green-carpeted den, decorated festively with a Christmas tree and other holiday knickknacks. Smith's father, in pajama bottoms and shirtless, was sitting in an armchair in front of the television, watching football.

Smith's boyfriend, Jesse Empey, also joined us. Younger than Smith, Empey has an angular face and dark features and looks a little like Keanu Reeves. He's a makeup artist and used to live in New York, and he met Smith through a mutual friend.

The tape was already in the video player — Smith had called ahead and asked his mother to cue it to one of his street fights. On the video, Smith appears in a backyard, shirtless and in black pants, wearing boxing hand wraps. His opponent is a trained boxer, a much larger man. It plays out like Smith's Felony Fights match. Smith's opponent keeps his distance, throwing punches, while Smith tries to take the fight to the ground. After a few botched charges, Smith tackles his opponent, and when he establishes a full mount, his opponent's father quickly intervenes and stops the fight before Smith's punches can do further damage.

"But keep watching," Smith told me. The camera is fixed on Smith as he unwinds the wrapping from his right hand. The camera zooms in, and there's a long patch of white running along one of his fingers. "That's where my bone came out," Smith said, smiling. "It hurt like hell, but I kept fighting."

The fight was not so different from the U.F.C. matches I had watched. Despite the freak injury, nobody was seriously hurt. And the fight was stopped quickly to preserve the fighters' safety. In other words, I suggested to Smith, it wasn't like Felony Fights. "Yeah," Smith agreed. "That's why I love organized mixed martial arts, because there are so many ways not to get hurt. You have a referee, a corner man, a doctor. You have all these things going in your favor." When it comes to Felony Fights, he said, "they're encouraging you to beat someone's face in."

Felony Fights features bouts and techniques that would never be allowed in the U.F.C. or any other state-sanctioned event. Some fights include weapons. Others pit two fighters against one, and even two women versus a man. Practices that are banned in mixed martial arts — including biting and fish-hooking, the term for inserting a finger into an opponent's mouth and tearing the cheek — are common.

Smith first heard of Felony Fights through a childhood friend who happened to be a business partner of the founder, Michael Lynch. Smith gave me the number of another partner, Anthony Garcia, who appeared as a fighter on the company's first DVD, "Felony Fights." (They have released five more DVDs.) When I called Garcia, he said that he and his partners had never spoken to the media before. "The media like to portray us the wrong way, like we're savages or something," he told me. But a few weeks later, he called me back and invited me to Los Angeles for a meeting. "We thought it was time to get our story out there and tell it ourselves," he said.

In October, I sat down with Lynch, Garcia and their three other partners. Lynch, who is small and wiry, with close-cropped dark hair and tattoos running along both forearms, did most of the talking over a couple of rounds of vodka-and-Red-Bull.

"I hate to break it to you, but a U.F.C. fighter isn't a guy that's been in a million street fights, where you walk around the corner, and you're, like, 'Damn, these are my enemies,' and you get stomped out for 20 minutes by 10 dudes," he said. Felony Fights, Lynch continued, merely reflected the reality of the streets.

Like Smith, Lynch had a rough upbringing. When he was 16, he was convicted of residential armed robbery and sent to the California Youth Authority. "I was supposed to do two years," he said. "But back then, I had a little bit of an anger problem — I had a misguided youth. And I turned two years into five, because I had a problem with stabbing people." When he was released, he turned to dealing drugs and guns. Eleven months later he was arrested again. When he was freed, six years later, on June 2, 2004, Lynch had a simple plan: "I got out and brought together some friends from the not-so-legal world to fight, and we got it on tape," he said.

At the time, Kevin Ferguson, better known as Kimbo Slice, a 6-foot-2, 240-pound bodyguard for a Miami pornography company who looks like a bigger, meaner version of Mr. T, was a new Internet fighting sensation. But the popularity of Slice's backyard bare-knuckle fights stemmed from his unique blend of menace and charisma. The fights themselves were not particularly violent. They were stand-up only and recalled the pre-Queensberry boxing days, with Slice a modern-day John Sullivan, the last of the bare-knuckle champions. (Last year, Slice joined the ranks of professional M.M.A. fighters, and he says he will no longer participate in unsanctioned fights.)

In contrast, Lynch's idea for Felony Fights echoed Chuck Palahniuk's novel "Fight Club." But rather than providing an outlet for bourgeois angst, Felony Fights offers ex-cons a chance to prove their violent bona fides. To stay on the right side of the law, the fights are filmed in Mexico and the fighters are not paid, Lynch said, contradicting what Shad Smith told me.

At first Lynch and his partners hustled their DVDs on the streets. Then they also got them into stores and, later, onto pay-per-view television. Recently they put out another pay-per-view offering, "Pornstar Punchout," featuring — as the name suggests — porn stars fighting in a boxing ring. Lynch told me that they were also in the process of organizing a sanctioned M.M.A. event, "Cons vs. Cops," pitting ex-convicts against police officers.

Lynch said, however, that the main focus would always be Felony Fights. The DVDs feature compilations of the fights and interviews with the fighters interspersed with cameos by Lynch's wife, the porn star Moni Michaels, and some of her friends — topless and brandishing guns. "Sex and violence sells," Lynch said. But

it's the violence that really sets his company apart. Felony Fights willfully disregards Palahniuk's third rule of Fight Club: "When someone says stop, or goes limp, even if he's just faking it, the fight is over."

On "Felony Fights 2," available at Best Buy for $14.99, there is a fight between two men who identify themselves as Miguel Alvarez and Tommy. In the prefight interview, Tommy says he has spent six years in juvenile detention and another 19 months in prison. His crime? "Stabbed some dude in the neck four times," Tommy says.

The fight is short. The two men approach each other throwing wild haymakers. Alvarez lands a knockout punch, and Tommy collapses to the ground. In the U.F.C., this fight would be over. Instead, Alvarez rushes over to his unconscious opponent and delivers five more punches to his head. Next, he leaps, bending his legs behind him, and slams his knees down on Tommy's face with the full weight of his body. Then he does it again. Finally, Lynch intervenes as Tommy lies on his back, moaning and struggling to breathe, with blood streaking down from a gash on his chin.

AT ONE POINT during the evening I spent with Smith at his home, he asked me if I wanted to play Scrabble. Sure, I said. We moved into the kitchen, and Smith asked his boyfriend to fetch us drinks. Smith said fans occasionally taunt him during his fights for being gay, but the other fighters never do. "It's like a fraternity," he said, and you're treated well "once these guys see you in the cage, as long you don't make a fool out of yourself."

I asked Empey if he was worried when he watched Smith fight. He said he was at first. "But then, once you know about the sport, you realize it's not that dangerous. It's a lot safer than boxing." Empey may be right. For all the blood spilled in mixed martial arts — in both its sanctioned and unsanctioned forms — it's difficult to determine just how dangerous such fights really are.

In July 2006, The Journal of Sports Science and Medicine published a study comparing the incidence of injury in professional mixed-martial-arts competitions and boxing. After analyzing 171 M.M.A. matches in Nevada, the authors found that fighters sustained 28.6 injuries per 100 fights. Nearly half of all injuries were facial lacerations — like the gash on David Heath's forehead at UFC 74. Recent boxing studies have found an overall injury rate of between 17.1 and 25 injuries per 100 bouts. But since there are so many different ways an M.M.A. match can end, including by tap out, the knockout proportion in M.M.A. competitions is less than "half of the reported 11.3 of professional boxing matches in Nevada," the M.M.A. study found.

Moreover, there have been only two recorded deaths in modern M.M.A. events compared with the 1,029 deaths worldwide in boxing events since 1920 tabulated by The Journal of Combative Sport. The first M.M.A. death came at an unsanctioned event in Kiev, Ukraine, in 1998, when an American fighter named Douglas Dedge collapsed from brain injuries after absorbing several punches. But he had not received a prefight medical exam and ignored earlier doctors' advice to give up the sport. And on Nov. 30, 2007, Sam Vasquez became the first competitor to die from injuries sustained in a sanctioned fight, a small-time event in Houston called Renegades Extreme Fighting. Like Dedge, he took several punches to the head and collapsed, but also like Dedge's case, there are lingering questions concerning Vasquez's prefight health.

Vasquez's death attracted some media attention but nothing like the scrutiny that would result if a fighter died in the U.F.C., which is the sport's premier franchise and is watched by millions. A death is "the last thing we'd want to see," said its president, Dana White. "But you know, there are a lot more deaths in sports like

polo, or even high-school football. So my question would be: Do you think we should ban those sports?" White took pains to disassociate his U.F.C. from underground organizations like Felony Fights. "You're always going to have those idiots out there," he said.

But Michael Lynch says he believes that Felony Fights is at exactly the same place the U.F.C. was 10 years ago, when it was banned by many states. "Some critics say this is barbaric," Lynch told me. "No, it's a sport. It's just because society can't understand it. They would have said the same thing about the U.F.C. before."

Felony Fights' owners also argue that their fights are not as savage as they appear. "A lot of people assumed Tommy died from watching just the short clip of the fight on the Internet," Anthony Garcia said. "All he had was a fractured jaw, six stitches and a fractured eye bone." (At the conclusion of the full scene from "Felony Fights 2," a cleaned-up but still disoriented Tommy gamely says to the camera, "I'm representing Felony Fights.")

Still, for both the U.F.C. and Felony Fights, the frisson of real danger — of death — will always be part of the draw. In between fights at UFC 74, the six huge screens in the auditorium displayed not only fight footage but also a dramatization of a lone, solemn warrior donning his armor in the halls of the Roman Colosseum — a gladiator preparing himself for battle and possible death. Felony Fights has only taken this to a higher level, as Lynch acknowledges. "There is no way, no way, anyone can compete with us other than killing the dude. And you can't."

EARLY INTO OUR Scrabble game, it struck me that Smith was probably a better Scrabble player than professional fighter. He played the words *redlines*, *residue* and *outlaws*, noting that the last, given our conversation, was fitting. Each of the words used all his letters, earning the 50-point bonus, and for two of them he managed to land on a triple-word-score square. As we went through the motions of finishing, I asked Smith if he had pondered the future of the fight world and his place in it.

"The sport's going nowhere but up," he said. "Everybody loves watching people fight. Everybody loves watching combat."

Smith might be right. These days, hardly anyone publicly calls for the banning of mixed martial arts, and no one's picketing Best Buy to stop stocking Felony Fights' products or engaged in the type of consumer campaigns that were aimed at early rap groups. Those who disapprove simply avert their eyes. This isn't cockfighting or dogfighting, the Princeton philosopher and animal rights activist Peter Singer explained in an e-mail message. "The big difference . . . is the informed consent of the participants. That seems to me to be crucial." Singer then echoed Senator McCain: "Although I don't really like violent sports like boxing, and presumably therefore would not like this either, I wouldn't advocate prohibition."

This is, of course, just what fighting's advocates want to hear. "Guess what?" Dana White had told me. "I hate golf, so I don't watch it. It's a choice."

Smith doesn't think the sport should be banned, either. And he blames the fighters and the friends who cheer them on, not Felony Fights's owners, for the forum's over-the-top violence. Still, he doubts he'll appear in another Felony Fights event, and, at 35, he's approaching old age for professional competition — Randy Couture is an anomaly. And Smith knows he'll now never fight in the U.F.C. He lacks the record or the dedication. Outside of the classes he leads, Smith rarely trains. "Some of those guys, you can feel their

intensity," he said. "I wish I could be like those guys, because I'd be unstoppable."

Perhaps he could have been, Smith said, but somewhere along the way he lost his edge. Among other reasons, he used to fight because he was gay and wanted to hide it, he said. But in prison, out on the yard one day, he came out to a friend, who said, "What you do with sex, that's your business — just don't try to kiss me or nothing." After that, Smith said, he didn't care who knew it, and it changed him as a fighter.

What he misses about the fighting thing, he said, is that he "used to be so aggressive, so ruthless. I couldn't lose a fight."

Now he mainly enjoys the camaraderie that previously he experienced only in prison. And he covets the attention only fighting can bring. "When I go into the cage, I have a big stupid grin on my face, and my corner is, like, 'Stop smiling,' " Smith said. "When you look down at everyone and 10,000 eyeballs are on you, it just feels so good."

Paul Wachter, a contributor to The Nation, wrote about the tennis player Donald Young for The New York Times Magazine last year.

June 22, 2008

BROWSING BOOKS

Paperback Row

By ELSA DIXLER

NEW ENGLAND WHITE, by Stephen L. Carter. (Vintage, $14.95.) Carter, who teaches at Yale Law School and is the author of "The Emperor of Ocean Park" as well as several works of nonfiction, combines mystery, academic satire and reporting on the lifestyles of the black upper class in this stylishly written novel. The wife of the black president of a university much like Yale, herself a divinity school dean, investigates the death of her former lover, an economist who was collecting evidence about a 30-year-old murder that threatened powerful politicians — including her husband's college roommate, now the president of the United States.

CLAPTON: The Autobiography, by Eric Clapton. (Broadway, $15.95.) The world's most famous rock-and-blues guitarist has written a searingly honest account of "how he became the rock 'n' roll version of Harry Potter ... the Boy Who Lived," our reviewer, Stephen King, wrote. Clapton describes the groups he played with, the musicians he has known, his complicated love life — particularly his infatuation with, marriage to and divorce from Pattie Boyd, who tells her side of the story in WONDERFUL TONIGHT: George Harrison, Eric Clapton, and Me (Three Rivers, $14.95), written with Penny Junor — and his addiction to heroin and alcohol, now 20 years in the past. King notes that Clapton finds it hard to communicate what his music means to him. "That's why they're songs," Clapton writes.

ON CHESIL BEACH, by Ian McEwan. (Anchor, $13.95.) In July 1962, on the eve of the sexual revolution, a young couple's disastrous wedding night has irrevocable effects. Writing in the Book Review, Jonathan Lethem praised McEwan's "boundless sympathy," which "enlists the reader." "This seeming novel of manners," Lethem continued, "is as fundamentally a horror novel as any McEwan's written.

SICK: The Untold Story of America's Health Care Crisis — and the People Who Pay the Price, by Jonathan Cohn. (Harper Perennial, $14.95.) Just in time for the election, Cohn, a senior editor at The New Republic, examines America's health care crisis, demonstrating through vignettes about ordinary people how the system's financing determines who gets proper care and who doesn't. He finds the French system the "showcase for what universal health care can achieve." In VACCINE: The Controversial Story of Medicine's Greatest Lifesaver (Norton, $17.95), Arthur Allen crisply traces both the history of vaccination and the controversies about it. Today's opponents are uninformed about the diseases their children are being inoculated against, Allen says, and he would welcome a frank national discussion about risks and benefits.

ONCE UPON A COUNTRY: A Palestinian Life, by Sari Nusseibeh with Anthony David. (Picador, $16.) The president of Al Quds University and a philosopher trained at Oxford and Harvard, Nusseibeh has long renounced violence and called for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In this "fascinating and deeply intelligent memoir," as Ethan Bronner described it in The Times, he recounts his ancient family's

experience during the 1948 war, his work as a volunteer on an Israeli archaeological dig and his imprisonment in Jerusalem in 1991. Palestinians and Israelis must learn to understand one another, he argues.

TEARING DOWN THE WALL OF SOUND: The Rise and Fall of Phil Spector, by Mick Brown. (Vintage, $16.95.) Brown, a British rock journalist, explains Spector's achievements as a record producer, but he focuses on his cruelty, his mistreatment of musicians and his growing alcohol-fueled paranoia. One of Spector's mentors is the subject of LONELY AVENUE: The Unlikely Life and Times of Doc Pomus, by Alex Halberstadt (Da Capo, $16). Pomus's rock 'n' roll songs of the late '50s and early '60s, filled with melancholy and yearning, drew on his personal and professional frustrations.

BLACK & WHITE, by Dani Shapiro. (Anchor, $13.95.) In this novel, a photographer becomes famous for her intimate pictures of her daughter (the work of Sally Mann may come to mind). The daughter flees the notoriety for a quiet life in Maine, but 14 years later, when her mother is dying of cancer, she returns to New York to come to terms with their personal and artistic past.

BURIED IN THE BITTER WATERS: The Hidden History of Racial Cleansing in America, by Elliot Jaspin. (Basic, $15.95.) Jaspin, whose specialty is computer-assisted reporting, discovered a troubling pattern: between 1890 and 1930, census data showed 260 counties in which the black population appeared to drop suddenly by more than 50 percent. In more than a dozen counties, he found evidence of mass racial expulsions, often precipitated by allegations of crimes by African-Americans, but more often economic in motivation.

RANT: An Oral Biography of Buster Casey, by Chuck Palahniuk. (Anchor, $13.95.) The author of "Fight Club" returns with a novel about a dystopian folk hero who may have been a serial killer. It displays his usual angry imagination and outrageous humor, but our reviewer, Field Maloney, warned that it feels stale and that "even his admirers may be disappointed."

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August 10, 2008

ESSAY; Cover Stories

By STEVEN HELLER

Rodrigo Corral's working relationship with Chuck Palahniuk began 10 years ago, when he designed Palahniuk's second book, "Survivor." "I knew 'Fight Club' well and was thrilled to be working on a project on the heels of such a successful book-to-movie," Corral said. "Chuck's writing always has energy and movement, and often reads like a screenplay. It is so filled with dramatic visuals that to illustrate something literally from the stories would undermine the writing and its deeper meaning." Corral says he's never literal with his designs, "because if I were, the covers would look like pulp horror novels."

The image he devised for Palahniuk's latest novel, "Snuff," covered two aspects of the book: sex and death. "Real snuff films, as we know, are about death," Corral said, "and there is an attempted-murder mystery in this story, so the girl hanging in the middle is a sign of what could come. (Swallowing a pill is also part of the plot.) As with all of Chuck's books, it's never about just one idea, so the story is not only about sex in the porn industry but about what its characters become. Women in porn become real-life blow-up dolls, and the mouth looks like it belongs to one of them."

To date, Corral has designed 10 Palahniuk books, but he's had only one conversation with the author. "Chuck was ready to publish his first collection of short stories, and I thought I had a great idea that I could simply run by him on the phone. The conversation didn't go well; tons of awkward silence followed by 'Yeaaah, great, ahhh, let's sit on this for a little while.'"

PHOTOS

October 17, 2008

Movies

By THE NEW YORK TIMES

MOVIES

Ratings and running times are in parentheses; foreign films have English subtitles. Full reviews of all current releases, movie trailers, showtimes and tickets: nytimes.com/movies.

'AN AMERICAN CAROL' (PG-13, 1:23) Michael Moore and the blame-America-first set are satirized, sort of, in this lazy, mean-spirited movie by David Zucker. (Nathan Lee)

'APPALOOSA' (R, 1:47) Ed Harris, who directed, stars with Viggo Mortensen, Ren?Zellweger and Jeremy Irons in this sly, relaxed western, which is less concerned with gunfighting and law and order than with jealousy, friendship and the perils of frontier romance. It's a somber shoot-em-up with the mischievous soul of a sex comedy. (A. O. Scott)

'BEVERLY HILLS CHIHUAHUA' (PG, 1:25) As multimillion-dollar frivolities about the pets of the ruling class go, "Beverly Hills Chihuahua" is reasonably diverting. As one released in the middle of an economic meltdown, its mere existence feels utterly insane. (Lee)

'BLINDNESS' (R, 2:01) An outbreak of metaphor threatens civilization. A fine group of actors -- especially Julianne Moore and Mark Ruffalo as a doctor and his wife -- does its best to save this adaptation of Jos?aramago's overrated book from its dull, earnest allegorical intentions. (Scott)

'BODY OF LIES' (R, 2:06) Ridley Scott's new movie raises a potentially disturbing question. If terrorism has become boring, does that mean that the terrorists have won? Or, conversely, is the grinding tedium of this film good news for our side, evidence of the awesome might of Western popular culture, which can turn even the most bloodthirsty real-world villains into fodder for contrived and lifeless action thrillers? (Scott)

'BURN AFTER READING' (R, 1:36) A predictably self-amused comedy from Joel and Ethan Coen with a tricky plot, visual style, er, to burn, but so little heart as to warrant a Jarvik 8. With George Clooney, Frances McDormand and Brad Pitt.

(Manohla Dargis)

'CHOKE' (R, 1:32) Marinated in the aesthetic of cooler-than-thou irony and hip transgression,

this absurdist comedy, adapted from a novel by the "Fight Club" author Chuck Palahniuk, is clever but not laugh-out-loud funny, except for a couple of hilarious riffs. (Stephen Holden)

'CITY OF EMBER' (PG, 1:35) In this science-fiction juvenilia, adapted from Jeanne DePrau's children's novel, two fresh-faced adolescents discover the path to freedom from a dying subterranean city whose power source is breaking down. (Holden) 'THE DARK KNIGHT' (PG-13, 2:32) Pitched at the divide between poetry and entertainment, Christopher Nolan's follow-up to "Batman Begins" goes darker and deeper than any Hollywood movie of its comic-book kind. With Christian Bale as the big bat and a spellbinding Heath Ledger as the smiler with the knives.

(Dargis)

'THE DUCHESS' (PG-13, 1:45) An overstuffed, underbaked portrait of the cosseted, tightly corseted late-18th-century life of Georgiana Spencer, the Duchess of Devonshire. Saul Dibbs directs, Keira Knightley stars, and Ralph Fiennes acts.

(Dargis)

'EAGLE EYE' (PG-13, 1:58) Shia LaBoeuf and Michelle Monaghan on the run from something. From what? A ticked-off government computer, apparently. Did I spoil it? Sorry. I mean, you're welcome. (Scott) 'THE EXPRESS' (PG, 2:09) Like "GloryRoad," "The Great Debate" and numerous similar movies, "The Express" packages a real-life story of athletic triumph and social progress into an accessible, rousing melodrama that is no less potent for being almost entirely predictable. (Scott)

'FIREPROOF' (PG, 2:02) In this film aimed at the Christian market, Kirk Cameron plays a firefighter who tries to save his marriage by embarking on a faith-based regimen called the Love Dare, but his wife (Erin Bethea) seems unresponsive. It's a much better attempt to merge storytelling with faith than is usual for the genre, and the amateur cast is surprisingly good. (Neil Genzlinger)

'FLASH OF GENIUS' (PG-13, 2:00) In this doggedly workmanlike and passionless variation on the lone crusader doing battle with the big, bad establishment, Greg Kinnear plays the real-life inventor of the intermittent windshield wiper who sued Ford for stealing his patent. (Holden) 'GHOST TOWN' (PG-13, 1:43) A misanthropic dentist (Ricky Gervais), a roguish ghost (T? Leoni) and a zany Egyptologist (Greg Kinnear): as this unlikely threesome scamper around Manhattan in this fluffy latter-day hybrid of "Topper" and "Blithe Spirit," they resurrect the spirits of classic '30s screwball characters in Woody Allen territory. (Holden)

'HAPPY-GO-LUCKY' (R, 1:58) Happiness is a complicated, difficult matter, and for the bopping bloom at the center of Mike Leigh's generous, expansive new film -- a gurgling stream of giggles, laughs and words played by a glorious Sally Hawkins -- it's also a question of faith.

(Dargis)

'IGOR' (PG, 1:26) An animated twist on the Frankenstein story that never sparks to life, "Igor" inhabits a cloud-covered kingdom where evil scientists are rewarded for diabolical inventions. John Cusack competently voices the hunchbacked servant who assembles a female monster, but kiddies will be undiverted by the humdrum animation and a palette that mirrors the film's moral and meteorological gloom. (Jeannette Catsoulis)

'I SERVED THE KING OF ENGLAND' (R, 1:58, in Czech) There is hardly a moment in this picaresque slapstick epic, directed by Jiri Menzel (''Closely Watched Trains'') and set mainly in 1930s and '40s Czechoslovakia that you are not aware that its absurdist view of the human condition was shaped by traumatic 20th-century events. (Holden)

'LAKEVIEW TERRACE' (PG-13, 1:46) In this silly exercise in mock provocation, Samuel L. Jackson plays a Los Angeles police officer who terrorizes his new neighbors, a perfectly nice interracial couple played by Patrick Wilson and Kerry Washington. (Scott)

'MAN ON WIRE' (PG-13, 1:34) Philippe Petit's 1974 tightrope walk between the towers of the World Trade Center might have seemed, at the time, like a crazy stunt, but James Marsh's beautiful documentary understands it as a work of art. (Scott)

'MIRACLE AT ST. ANNA' (PG-13, 2:40) Spike Lee's World War II drama about a squad of African-American soldiers fighting in Italy is overlong and ungainly, but it has enough moments of warmth and conviction to make it a worthy addition to the combat genre. (Scott) 'NICK & NORAH'S INFINITE PLAYLIST' (PG-13, 1:30) Teenagers falling in love on the tame night streets of Manhattan. As thin as an iPod Nano and as sweetly self-conscious as a Facebook page, but not without charm. (Scott)

'NIGHTS IN RODANTHE' (PG-13, 1:37) Richard Gere and Diane Lane fumble like teenagers and mouth some pitiful, platitudinous, risible dialogue in a soggy romance directed by George C. Wolfe and based on a Nicholas Sparks book. (Dargis)

'QUARANTINE' (R, 1:26) The recent resurgence of the pseudo-documentary horror movie continues with this tale of a television news team trapped in an urban apartment building whose residents are harboring a mysterious infection. Cleverly working his claustrophobic setting (and the adapted script from the Spanish movie "[REC]"), the director, John Erick Dowdle, keeps the action tight and the injuries nasty. (Catsoulis)

'RACHEL GETTING MARRIED' (R, 1:54) Anne Hathaway plays Kym, furloughed from rehab to attend her sister Rachel's wedding. The director, Jonathan Demme, working from a script by Jenny Lumet, takes a fairly conventional family-therapy drama and packs it with exuberant vitality. There is ample sorrow and recrimination at this party, but nonetheless you'll be sorry when it ends. (Scott)

'RELIGULOUS' (R, 1:41) The comedian and outspoken religious nonbeliever Bill Maher travels the world interviewing Christians, Jews and Muslims about their beliefs, which he views as dangerous nonsense.

(Holden)

'RIGHTEOUS KILL' (R, 1:40) Robert De Niro and Al Pacino go macho-a-macho in a thrill-free B-movie thriller (more like C-minus) that probably sounded like a grand idea when their handlers whispered it in their ears. Jon Avnet directed. (Dargis)

'ROCKNROLLA' (R, 1:57) In his latest, the director Guy Ritchie pumps up the volume, tilts the camera, flexes the muscle, struts the stuff for some bang bang, blah blah. (Dargis)

'A SECRET' (No rating, 1:45, in French) Claude Miller's adaptation of Philippe Grimbert's autobiographical novel is a subtle and moving exploration of intimacy and desire in a French Jewish family before and after World War II. (Scott)

'TALENTO DE BARRIO' (R, 1:47, in Spanish and English) Daddy Yankee, the reggaet?tar, tries acting here, and looks as if he might have some ability in that department, but the story is so clich?that it's hard to tell. He plays a gangster who rules a ratty slum in Puerto Rico but -- guess what? -- he aspires to be a performer. Will his drug-dealing past drag him down, or can he escape the bad life? Original it ain't.

(Genzlinger)

'TROUBLE THE WATER' (No rating, 1:33) While making this superb documentary about that natural and unnatural disaster, Hurricane Katrina, the filmmakers Carl Deal and Tia Lessin hit the jackpot when they meet two New Orleans survivors, Kimberly and Scott Roberts, who rode out the storm with a video camera. (Dargis)

'TYLER PERRY'S THE FAMILY THAT PREYS' (PG-13, 1:51) The suds that cascade through Tyler Perry melodrama more than equal the cubic footage from nighttime soaps like ''Dallas,'' ''Dynasty'' and their offspring. (Holden)

'VICKY CRISTINA BARCELONA' (PG-13, 1:36) A rueful comedy from Woody Allen about two young American women (Scarlett Johansson and Rebecca Hall) who, during a summertime European idyll, savor numerous Continental delicacies, some provided by the equally alluring Javier Bardem and Pen?pe Cruz. (Dargis)

'WILD COMBINATION: A PORTRAIT OF ARTHUR RUSSELL' (No rating, 1:10) This exquisite documentary by Matt Wolf pays homage to the soulful sounds of Arthur Russell, an extravagantly gifted musician who died of AIDS in 1992. (Lee)

'THE WOMEN' (PG-13, 1:54) ''What is this, some '30s movie?'' a character asks in this

misbegotten remake of George Cukor's feline look at female friendship and rivalry. If only. (Scott)

Film Series

BATISTE MADALENA AND THE CINEMA OF THE 1920S (Monday and Wednesday) Hired in 1924 to create custom posters for the Eastman Theater in Rochester, Batiste Madalena applied his talents to more than 1,400 original works before he left Eastman's employ in 1928. Approximately 250 of his elegant Art Nouveau creations survive, and 53 of them will be on display in the lobby galleries of the Roy and Niuta Titus Theaters at the Museum of Modern Art, through April 6. A series of films for which Madalena designed posters runs concurrently, beginning on Monday with D. W. Griffith's 1925 ''Sally of the Sawdust,'' starring W. C. Fields, and Mauritz Stiller's 1927 ''Hotel Imperial,'' with Pola Negri. The film program continues through March 14. Museum of Modern Art Roy and Niuta Titus Theaters, (212) 708-9400, moma.org; $10.

(Dave Kehr)'A TIME FOR BURNING' (Monday) From the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences film archive, a new print of William C. Jersey's Oscar-nominated 1967 cin?-verit? ocumentary. The subject is the Rev. L. William Youngdahl, a white Lutheran minister in Omaha, Neb., who bravely tries to establish ties with a black Lutheran congregation on the other side of town. But this is no Hollywood heart-warmer: things do not go as planned. Elvis Mitchell, a former film critic for The New York Times, is scheduled to lead a post-screening discussion with Mr. Jersey and the former Nebraska State Democratic Senator Ernie Chambers, who was a young Omaha barber and budding community leader when he appeared in Mr. Jersey's film. (Academy Theater, 111 East 59th Street, Manhattan, (888) 778-7575, Oscars.org/events; $5. (Kehr)

TRUTH OR DARE: THE FILMS OF ANDRZEJ WAJDA (Friday through Thursday) Born in 1926, Andrzej Wajda has become Poland's semi-official national filmmaker, a witness to his country's troubled 20th-century history, from the German occupation (depicted in the brilliant mid-'50s trilogy that introduced him to the world: ''A Generation,'' ''Kanal'' and ''Ashes and Diamonds'') to the spread of the Solidarity movement (in ''Man of Marble'' and ''Man of Iron'') and the collapse of Polish Communism. This retrospective, said to be the most complete to be assembled in the United States, is sponsored by the Film Society of Lincoln Center and the Polish Cultural Institute of New York, and will go on a national tour after its Lincoln Center engagement. More than 30 films and television productions are included, ranging from famous works like ''Everything for Sale'' -- Mr. Wajda's 1969 tribute to the actor Zbigniew Cybulski, who starred in his first films and died in a train accident in 1967 -- to intriguing obscurities like his 1972 ''Pilate and Others,'' an adaptation of the biblical chapters of Mikhail Bulgakov's ''Master and Margarita,'' made for West German television. Mr. Wajda will be present to introduce Friday's 7:30 p.m. screening of the 1975 nationalist epic ''The Promised Land,'' and will be

joined by the actress Elzbieta Czyzewska to present "Everything for Sale" on Saturday at 6:30 p.m. Walter Reade Theater, 165 West 65th Street, Lincoln Center, (212) 975-5600, filmlinc.org; $11. (Kehr)

January 2, 2009

Journey of a Director, From Night Creature to Tender Time Traveler

By DENNIS LIM

"The Curious Case of Benjamin Button," an old-school Hollywood romance with an eccentric streak, provides an occasion to ponder the curious case of David Fincher, a big-budget filmmaker with a taste for perversity.

In a series titled Under the Sign of Fincher, which runs through Sunday, the Walter Reade Theater at Lincoln Center is showcasing "Benjamin Button," Mr. Fincher's seventh feature, alongside three of his earlier works — "Seven" (1995), "Fight Club" (1999) and "Zodiac" (2007) — and three other movies that he considers formative touchstones. On Sunday a screening of "Benjamin Button" will be followed by a conversation between Mr. Fincher and Kent Jones, the associate director of programming at the Film Society of Lincoln Center.

Though he has always been something of a polarizing figure, Mr. Fincher, 46, is ensconced within the creative elite of Hollywood auteurs, in the company of Steven Soderbergh, Christopher Nolan, Paul Thomas Anderson and a handful of others, who are able to maintain artistic control within the studio system. In many ways, however, he does not fit the standard profile of a personal filmmaker, which may be why it has taken critics a while to warm up to him. He does not write his movies and generally sticks to genre fare. His feature directing career began with the third installment of the "Alien" franchise, and before "Benjamin Button" all his movies were noirish thrillers of a sort.

There is also the matter of his technical virtuosity, which tends to inspire both admiration and suspicion. A teenage apprentice at George Lucas's effects house, Industrial Light and Magic, and then a hotshot director of commercials and music videos (including a brace of enormously influential ones for Madonna, at the height of her image-making powers), Mr. Fincher has always been in the business of expensive illusion and manufactured beauty. To call him a superficial stylist misses the point; in many of his films the surface is the substance. It is easy to get lost in — and perhaps as a result, to underestimate — the sheer sensory pleasures of his movies: their dynamic compositions and kinetic rhythms, sinuous camera movements and seamless digital wizardry.

"Alien 3" (1992) was a baptism of fire for Mr. Fincher. He butted heads with the studio, 20th Century Fox, over the script, the budget, the edit — the experience was so traumatic that he distanced himself from the film and told interviewers he might never work in movies again. The project that lured him back was, of all things, "Seven," a sick-joke thriller about a serial killer-cum-conceptual artist who poses his victims in macabre tableaus modeled on the seven deadly sins.

It is Mr. Fincher's fastidious, even baroque handling of the material — and his suggestive approach to the violence — that elevates it far above exploitation. Working with the first-rate cinematographer Darius

Khondji he cloaked the film in overwhelmingly dank and baleful atmospherics, even subjecting the celluloid to a chemical process that rendered the dark hues denser and murkier. Most of Mr. Fincher’s films, from the claustrophobic gloom of “Alien 3” to the textured nightscapes of “Zodiac,” are variations on the art of making darkness visible. (The Lincoln Center series opened Thursday with a mischievous double bill of “Seven” and “Mary Poppins,” the first film Mr. Fincher saw, at the age of 3.)

He hit his stride again with “Fight Club,” a film about the fragile, vain and divided male psyche that was itself a provocative paradox: a seductive commercial for anti-consumerism. Still, this adrenalized jolt of designer nihilism tapped right into late-capitalist disaffection and premillennial anxiety.

As with most of his other films, including “The Game” (1997) and “Panic Room” (2002), the dominant mood is paranoia, but the source novel, by Chuck Palahniuk, with its crisis-of-masculinity pathos and hysteria, also occasioned the first semblance of emotional investment in Mr. Fincher’s work. “Fight Club” screens Friday night with another era-defining buddy movie, “Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid” (1969).

Just as the anti-materialist salvos of “Fight Club” seemed to repudiate the very values Mr. Fincher has had to perpetuate as an occasional corporate pitchman, “Zodiac” functions as a rejoinder of sorts to “Seven.” In this detailed, jigsawlike procedural, which cracks open the unsolved case of the symbol-mad killer who taunted and terrorized the Bay Area in the late ’60s and early ’70s, the thrill and confusion of the chase gives way to the slow burn and the haunting clarity of defeat.

Paired at the Walter Reade with Roman Polanski’s “Chinatown” (1974), another panoramic California crime story, “Zodiac” is a monument to obsession, and on some level a self-portrait of this most methodical and fanatical of filmmakers. It prefigures the big themes and sweeping scale of “Benjamin Button” and may come to seem a turning point in Mr. Fincher’s career: the moment that this ingenious manipulator of screen space turned himself to the challenges of time.

The film series Under the Sign of Fincher runs through Sunday at the Walter Reade Theater at Lincoln Center; filmlinc.com.

ProQuest

Databases selected: Multiple databases...

The New York Times

Police Say 'Fight Club' Inspired Teenage Bomber; [Metropolitan Desk]

Dominick Tao. **New York Times**. (Late Edition (East Coast)). New York, N.Y.: Jul 16, 2009. pg. A.24

Abstract (Summary)

When a homemade bomb constructed from fireworks explosives, a plastic bottle and electrical tape was set off outside a Starbucks coffee shop on the Upper East Side early on May 25, the police initially thought the explosion might be linked to three others with similar profiles.

Full Text (666 words)

When a homemade bomb constructed from fireworks explosives, a plastic bottle and electrical tape was set off outside a Starbucks coffee shop on the Upper East Side early on May 25, the police initially thought the explosion might be linked to three others with similar profiles.

But on Wednesday, after the arrest of a Chelsea teenager in the Starbucks attack, the police said there was no connection between that attack and the three others. Instead, the Starbucks bomber had his own agenda, the police said: to emulate the assaults on corporate America planned by a character in the movie "Fight Club."

The teenager, Kyle Shaw, 17, was arrested Tuesday night and charged with first-degree arson and first-degree criminal possession of a weapon, the authorities said.

"His statements indicated he was launching his own 'Project Mayhem,' " Police Commissioner Raymond W. Kelly said at a news conference on Wednesday, referring to a plan hatched by the protagonist of "Fight Club," played by Brad Pitt, to sabotage corporations by destroying property. Mr. Shaw had told a friend to "watch the news on Memorial Day," May 25, Mr. Kelly said.

Mr. Shaw pleaded not guilty on Wednesday night at his arraignment in Manhattan Criminal Court. Judge Abraham Clott ordered him held in $300,000 bond or $100,000 cash bail.

A prosecutor, Christopher Ryan, said people who knew Mr. Shaw had approached the police after he told them that he had planted the Starbucks bomb and was planning a similar attack elsewhere. The police placed Mr. Shaw under surveillance, Mr. Ryan said, before arresting him. He said a search of Mr. Shaw's home on West 27th Street yielded a news clipping detailing the aftermath of the explosion, a box of sparklers and a DVD of the 1999 David Fincher film, based on a novel by Chuck Palahniuk.

Mr. Fincher and Mr. Palahniuk, through their agents, declined to comment.

Mr. Kelly said investigators had ruled out a link between the Starbucks bombing and the three earlier explosions -- at an office building on Third Avenue housing the British Consulate in 2005, at the Mexican Consulate on 39th Street in 2007, and at the Times Square military recruiting station in 2008. All of the attacks occurred in the early morning hours, inflicted little damage and caused no injuries.

Investigators said it was too early to say if Mr. Shaw had intended to harm people, but the police commissioner said the bomb was powerful enough to have caused serious injuries if anyone had been close by. It damaged a bench and shattered the coffee shop's windows.

Mr. Shaw had started an underground fight club modeled on the one in the film, Mr. Kelly said, and had bragged to friends that he was behind the bombing.

Neighbors of Mr. Shaw, who recently graduated from high school, said they believed he was planning to take a year off before college to work and save money. One said he was considering trying to become a city firefighter.

"We watched him grow up," said a neighbor, Jon Glick, 44, who is a graphic designer. "He's absolutely a nice kid."

Brandon Lewis, a former schoolmate of Mr. Shaw's, said the arrest came as a surprise. The two were classmates at the School of the Future near Gramercy Park before Mr. Shaw transferred to the City-as-School High School in the West Village last year, Mr. Lewis said.

"I would never paint him in that way, as a domestic terrorist or anything," Mr. Lewis said. "He never gave an inkling that he was into that. He is very funny. Very outgoing. Friendly with mostly everybody."

Mr. Shaw's affinity for "Fight Club" was well known.

"He saw the movie and he read the book," Mr. Lewis said. "He wanted to watch the movie in our English class in the 11th grade. We were discussing existentialism in class, and he suggested we watch the movie as an example. We ended up watching 'I Heart Huckabees.' "

Credit: DOMINICK TAO; Colin Moynihan contributed reporting.

Indexing (document details)

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July 22, 2009

WHAT'S ON TODAY

By NIDA NAJAR

8 P.M. (IFC) I HUCKABEES (2004) Albert (Jason Schwartzman) leads an environmental-activism agency that hires a husband-and-wife "existential detective" team (Dustin Hoffman and Lily Tomlin) to get to the bottom of a series of coincidences in his life. On the way he is forced to re-examine that life and his tensions with Brad (Jude Law, above right with Mr. Schwartzman), a smooth-talking corporate type who runs the local department store, Huckabees. In a review for The New York Times, Manohla Dargis wrote that the film was "a comedy of dialectics, in which opposing dualities slug it out like wounded lovers, but it's nothing if not deeply sincere."

7 A.M. (ABC) GOOD MORNING AMERICA The former first daughter Jenna Bush is a guest. Maxwell croons.

10 A.M. (ABC); 5 P.M. (55) RACHAEL RAY Topics include health warning signs and how to reduce a cellphone bill.

10 A.M. (Fox) THE WENDY WILLIAMS SHOW Michael Urie talks about his role on "Ugly Betty"; Chrisette Michele performs.

8 P.M. (ABC, CBS, CNBC, CNN, C-Span, Fox News, MSNBC, NBC, 13) PRESIDENTIAL NEWS CONFERENCEPresident Obama discusses health-care reform and other topics.

8 P.M. (Fox) SO YOU THINK YOU CAN DANCEEllen DeGeneres and Mia Michaels are the guest judges as the top eight contestants perform.

8 P.M. (AMC) FIGHT CLUB (1999) The first rule of Fight Club: don't talk about Fight Club. Suffice it to say that Edward Norton and Brad Pitt, smoking at right, share an interest in pugilism in this film adaptation of the Chuck Palahniuk novel. In a review for The Times, Janet Maslin wrote that the film's director, David Fincher, "for the first time finds subject matter audacious enough to suit his lightning-fast visual sophistication and puts that style to stunningly effective use."

9 P.M. (CNN) BLACK IN AMERICA 2 In this two-part report, which concludes on Thursday, Soledad O'Brien looks at a program to help former inmates make the transition to the straight life; an eye-opening trip that took Brooklyn youngsters to South Africa; and other efforts to deal

with issues of interest to black Americans.

9 P.M. (Food Network) THROWDOWN WITH BOBBY FLAY The chef Bobby Flay challenges the owner of Manny's Buckhorn Tavern in New Mexico to a green-chili cheeseburger cook-off.

9 P.M. (Syfy) GHOST HUNTERS INTERNATIONAL The team investigates Houska Castle in the Czech Republic, built in the 13th century and rumored to have its share of evil spirits.

10 P.M. (13) THE MARKET MAKER This entry in the "Wide Angle" series follows the efforts of an Ethiopian economist, Eleni Gabre-Madhin, as she creates and tries to institute the nation's first commodities exchange, on the theory that an updated market system will help end food shortages. Since the inception of the exchange last year, Ms. Gabre-Madhin has been trying to oversee it while keeping special interests at bay and coping with problems like an unpredictable climate and the global economic crisis.

10 P.M. (Bravo) TOP CHEF MASTERS The quick-fire round takes place in a supermarket, after which the three winning chefs have to create meals using ingredients in a mystery box.

10 P.M. (TNT) DARK BLUE Ty (Omari Hardwick, left foreground, with Dylan McDermott), working undercover to catch a gun trafficker, breaks with protocol to spend the evening with his wife on her birthday, risking his life, as well as the case, when the trafficker follows him.

10 P.M. (NBC) THE PHILANTHROPIST Teddy (James Purefoy) hopes to invest in a mine in Kosovo that would bring much-needed cash to the country, which was ravaged by war with Serbian forces in the '90s. He doesn't take into account, however, the tension between ethnic Albanians and a minority Serbian population.

10 P.M. (MTV) THE REAL WORLD C J and Joey, fed up with Ayiiia's antics, confront her.

10 P.M. (TLC) TODDLERS & TIARAS In this second-season premiere, young aspiring beauty queens -- families in tow -- compete in the Universal Royalty pageant in Texas. NIDA NAJAR

PHOTOS

The New York Times

August 12, 2009

OP-ED COLUMNIST

Toilet-Paper Barricades

By MAUREEN DOWD

WASHINGTON

You may recall the seventh rule of "Fight Club": Fights will go on as long as they have to.

In this summer of our discontent, fights are spreading like mountain wildfires — from a town hall in Lebanon, Pa., to one in Kinshasa, Congo. Never before have we had so many tools to learn and to communicate. Yet the art of talking, listening and ascertaining the truth seems more elusive than ever in this Internet and cable age, lost in a bitter stream of blather and misinformation.

The postpartisan, postracial, post-Clinton-dysfunction world that Barack Obama was supposed to usher in when he hit town on his white charger, with turtle doves tweeting, has vanished.

Hillary's KO in the Congo on Monday made the covers of both New York tabloids. Using tough hand gestures not seen since "The Sopranos" went off HBO, Hillary snapped back at an African college student who asked about the growing influence of China on Africa and then, according to the translator, wanted to know: "What does Mr. Clinton think?"

It turned out that the student was trying to ask how President Obama felt about it. But before he was able to clarify, the secretary of state flared: "Wait, you want me to tell you what my husband thinks? My husband is not the secretary of state. I am."

This raw, competitive response showed that the experiment in using the Clintons as a tandem team on diplomacy may not be going as smoothly as we had hoped; once more, as with health care, the conjugal psychodrama drags down the positive contribution the couple can make on policy.

At Tuesday's State Department briefing, Assistant Secretary P.J. Crowley explained that Hillary was particularly irritated to feel overshadowed by men in Africa, where she is pushing her "abiding theme" of "empowering women."

Nice try, P.J. But we all know Hillary could just as well have made the same comment in Paris. (And looking unhinged about your marriage on an international stage hardly empowers women.) She may have been steamed about Bill celebrating his upcoming 63rd birthday in Las Vegas with his posse. The Times's Adam Nagourney irritated Clinton Inc. when he reported that Bill went to the pricey Craftsteak restaurant at the MGM Grand Hotel Monday night with Hollywood moguls Steve Bing and Haim Saban, and former advisers Terry McAuliffe and Paul Begala, among others.

Another rule of “Fight Club,” as Brad Pitt explained, is: When someone yells “stop” or goes limp, the fight is over. Unfortunately for Arlen Specter and Claire McCaskill, that rule didn’t apply at their donnybrooks on health care on Tuesday. The senators were punching bags for audience members irate about everything from the trillions in debt and illegal immigrants to term limits and toilet paper.

As Katy Abram told Fox News after passionately confronting Specter: “I know that years down the road, I don’t want my children coming to me and asking me, ‘Mom, why didn’t you do anything? Why do we have to wait in line for, I don’t know, toilet paper or anything?’ ”

Besides the chilling prospect of 21st-century America morphing into a cold war state — with Sheryl Crow in charge of toilet-paper rationing — there are also delusional fears about the government tapping bank accounts and convening “death panels,” as Sarah Palin dubbed them, to exploit the cost-saving potential of euthanizing the old and disabled.

At his more placid town hall in Portsmouth, N.H., on Tuesday, the president had to explain that he did not intend to “pull the plug on grandma.” He said that the specter of death panels had spun out of a proposal from a Republican, Senator Johnny Isakson of Georgia, who has long espoused helping Medicare patients learn about options for care at the end of their lives. In an interview with The Washington Post on Monday, Isakson diagnosed Palin’s interpretation of his suggestion as “nuts.”

The young grass-roots army that swept Obama into office has yet to mobilize now that the fight is about something complicated rather than a charismatic hope-monger. No, they can’t?

Instead of a multicultural tableau of beaming young idealists on screen, we see ugly scenes of mostly older and white malcontents, disrupting forums where others have come to actually learn something. Instead of hope, we get swastikas, death threats and T-shirts proclaiming “Proud Member of the Mob.”

President Obama has proven quicksilver instincts, but not in this case. You would think that a politician schooled in community organizing and the foul balls of a presidential campaign would be ready to squash this kind of nuttiness. (Like it or not, Speaker Pelosi, that’s democracy in action.) Instead, the president’s overconfident Harvard Law Review side, expecting a high-minded debate, prevailed.

He knows how to rise to the occasion, even when others are in the dirt. But he may be running out of time.

Thomas L. Friedman is off today.

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The New York Times

Texas: Fight Club Sentencing; [Brief]

The Associated Press. **New York Times**. (Late Edition (East Coast)). New York, N.Y.: Sep 18, 2009. pg. A.18

Full Text (59 words)

A Texas man who helped orchestrate fights among developmentally disabled residents at a state-run school has been sentenced to four years in prison. A jury also sentenced the man, D'Angelo Riley, 23, to eight years' probation for his role in what the police called a "fight club" at the Corpus Christi State School. Mr. Riley pleaded guilty in July.

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The New York Times

'Fight Club' Fight Goes On; [Arts and Leisure Desk]

Dennis Lim. **New York Times**. (Late Edition (East Coast)). New York, N.Y.: Nov 8, 2009. pg. AR.18

Abstract (Summary)

Not only has "Fight Club" performed exceptionally well on DVD -- it has sold more than six million copies on DVD and video, and is being issued in a 10th anniversary Blu-ray edition on Nov. 17 -- but it has also become a kind of cultural mother lode. Besides elevating the profile of the novelist Chuck Palahniuk, who wrote the original 1996 book, Mr. Fincher's film has spawned a video game (featuring the Limp Bizkit frontman Fred Durst as a character) and a Donatella Versace fashion line (men's wear adorned with razor blades).

Full Text (1283 words)

CULT films, the critic Danny Peary wrote in his 1981 book "Cult Movies," "are born in controversy" and elicit "a fiery passion in moviegoers that exists long after their initial releases." By those measures David Fincher's "Fight Club," a movie that stirred vitriolic ire when it came out 10 years ago and today inspires obsessive, often worshipful scrutiny in both lowbrow and highbrow quarters, is surely the defining cult movie of our time.

In his memoir Art Linson, a producer of the film, describes the aftermath of the first screening at the 20th Century Fox lot: ashen-faced executives imagining their higher-ups (including Rupert Murdoch) "flopping around like acid-crazed carp wondering how such a thing could even have happened."

The nervousness over screen violence was at a renewed high in the wake of the shootings at Columbine High School, and this must have seemed like the worst possible time to release a film in which an army of alienated men, led by Brad Pitt's charismatic Tyler Durden, an ubermensch in a red leather jacket, engage in bare-knuckle brawls, antisocial vandalism and outright revolutionary terrorism. When "Fight Club" opened in October 1999 after much defensive maneuvering from the studio (which delayed the release and struggled to find a marketing hook), the pundits eagerly took aim.

"The critical reaction was polarized," said Edward Norton, who plays the film's nameless narrator, "but the negative half of that was as vituperative as anything I've ever been a part of."

In one of the more apoplectic slams, Rex Reed, writing in The New York Observer, called it "a film without a single redeeming quality, which may have to find its audience in hell." More than one critic condemned the movie as an incitement to violence; several likened it to fascist propaganda. ("It resurrects the Fuhrer principle," one British critic declared.) On her talk show an appalled Rosie O'Donnell implored viewers not to see the movie and, for good measure, gave away its big twist.

As many had hoped and predicted "Fight Club," which had a budget of more than $60 million, bombed at the box office, earning $37 million during its North American run. But the film's potent afterlife is proof that, as Mr. Norton put it, "you can't always rate the value of a piece of art through the short turnaround ways that we tend to assess things."

Not only has "Fight Club" performed exceptionally well on DVD -- it has sold more than six million copies on DVD and video, and is being issued in a 10th anniversary Blu-ray edition on Nov. 17 -- but it has also become a kind of cultural mother lode.

Besides elevating the profile of the novelist Chuck Palahniuk, who wrote the original 1996 book, Mr. Fincher's film has spawned a video game (featuring the Limp Bizkit frontman Fred Durst as a character) and a Donatella Versace fashion line (men's wear adorned with razor blades). The swaggering gospel of Tyler Durden, much of it taken verbatim from Mr. Palahniuk's book, has provided the cultural lexicon with one seemingly deathless catchphrase ("The first rule of Fight Club is you do not talk about Fight Club") and numerous pop-sociological sound bites ("We're a generation of men raised by women"; "You are not your khakis").

Reports and urban legends about real-life fight clubs and copycat crimes still pop up occasionally. In the academic sphere, as an Internet search of scholarly journals reveals, "Fight Club" has inspired a host of interpretations -- Nietzschean, Buddhist, Marxist -- in papers that take on topics including the "rhetoric of masculinity," the "poetics of the body" and the "economics of patriarchy."

Mr. Fincher, who crammed the collector's edition DVD, released in 2000, with a trove of deleted scenes and behind-the-scenes supplements (all are available on the new Blu-ray version), said the movie needed time to be freed from initial preconceptions. "It was sold as, hey come see people beat each other up," he said recently by phone from Boston, where he was shooting a film about the founding of Facebook called "The Social Network." To his irritation Fox ran ads during wrestling matches, and many critics described it as a head-banging testosterone fest. But Mr. Fincher has observed that "women maybe get the humor faster," he said, adding that young female audiences seemed to appreciate the film's satirical spin on macho posturing. Reached by e-mail, Mr. Palahniuk went further and called the film "the best date flick ever." "The 'Fight Club' generation is the first generation to whom sex and death seem synonymous," he said, pointing out that the "meet-cute" between the characters played by Mr. Norton and Helena Bonham Carter occurs in a support group for the terminally ill. Having grown up with an awareness of AIDS, younger readers and viewers, he added, "could identify with the implied marriage of sex and death; and once that fear was acknowledged those people could move forward and risk finding romantic love."

Mr. Fincher, Mr. Norton and Mr. Pitt, who were all in their 30s when they made the film (as was Mr. Palahniuk when he wrote the book), have each talked about being personally struck by the angry-young-man disaffection of "Fight Club." When Mr. Fincher read the novel, he said, "I thought, Who is this Chuck Palahniuk and how has he been intercepting all my inner monologues?"

The movie's arrival in the season of pre-millennial anxiety gave it the aura of what Mr. Norton called "an end-of-the-century protest." A highly personal work made within the studio system, it also seemed like part of a larger cinematic groundswell. "There was a feeling that our crowd was starting to express itself," Mr. Norton said, referring to a bountiful year for young American filmmakers that also saw revelatory works like Paul Thomas Anderson's "Magnolia,"David O. Russell's "Three Kings" and Spike Jonze's "Being John Malkovich."

But as with all generational touchstones there is the matter of a cultural divide. "People get scared, not just of violence and mortality, but viewers are terrified of how they can no longer relate to the evolving culture," Mr. Palahniuk said. Some older audiences prefer darker material in conventional forms; they "really truly want nothing more than to watch Hilary Swank strive and suffer and eventually die -- beaten to a pulp, riddled with cancer, or smashed in a plane crash."

The secret to the enduring allure of "Fight Club" may be that it is, as Mr. Norton put it, quoting Mr. Fincher, "a serious film made by deeply unserious people." In other words, a film as willing to take on profound questions as it is to laugh at and contradict itself: what is "Fight Club" if not the most fashionable commercial imaginable for anti-materialism? A movie of big ideas and abundant ambiguities, it can be read and reread in many ways.

Mr. Fincher said, "Every once in a while someone will send me their thesis and ask, Is this close to the mark?" He sometimes shares the papers with Mr. Palahniuk and the actors but said it's ultimately not for him to decide.

Mr. Norton agrees. "Joseph Campbell has that great idea about mythologies, that a myth functions best when it's transparent, when people see through the story to themselves," he said. "When something gets to the point where it becomes the vehicle for people sorting out their own themes, I think you've achieved a kind of holy grail. Maybe the best you can say is that you've managed to do something true to your own sensations. But at the same time you realize that this has nothing to do with you."

[Photograph]
Brad Pitt, Center, As Tyler Durden, in "Fight Club" (1999). (Photograph by 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment)

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FIGHT CLUB
Wilmington, Delaware / Long Beach, CA
1999 – Present

(immediately following)
Los Angeles Times

ProQuest

WRITING HOLLYWOOD; [HOME EDITION 9]

SUZANNE MANTELL. **Los Angeles Times**. Los Angeles, Calif.: Jan 10, 1999. pg. R.4

Abstract (Summary)

"Bringing Out the Dead," Joe Connelly's first novel, is set in New York's Hell's Kitchen and stars Nicholas Cage as Frank Pierce, the burned out paramedic. Paul Schrader did the adaptation, and Martin Scorsese directs, End of the year.

"Girl. Interrupted," Susanna Kaysen's memoir of her stay in a mental hospital during the late '60s, stars Winona Ryder as Kaysen, Vanessa Redgrave as chief psychiatrist and Whoopi Goldberg as ward nurse. James Mangold directs. October release.

Full Text (333 words)

Hollywood is bingeing on books. This preview, continued from last week, still barely scratches the surface of what the new year holds.

"The Bone Collector," Jeffrey Deaver's 1997 thriller, stars Denzel Washington as Lincoln Rhyme, a quadriplegic ex-NYPD forensic specialist called back into action to find a serial killer. Fall release.

"Fight Club," the debut apocalyptic novel by Chuck Palahniuk published in 1996, stars Brad Pitt as Tyler Durden, messianic nihilist and inventor of a club where ordinary men engage in mortal combat. Summer release.

"Next to You," a teen comedy based on "Girl Gives Birth to Own Prom Date" by Todd Strasser. The movie stars Melissa loan Hart as Nicole, who needs a dream guy and transforms her grunge neighbor into appropriate material. Spring release.

"Bringing Out the Dead," Joe Connelly's first novel, is set in New York's Hell's Kitchen and stars Nicholas Cage as Frank Pierce, the burned out paramedic. Paul Schrader did the adaptation, and Martin Scorsese directs, End of the year.

Scott Spencer's "Waking the Dead" is due in the spring, along with a reissue of the 1986 novel. Keith Gordon wrote the screenplay and directs. Billy Crudup stars.

"Girl. Interrupted," Susanna Kaysen's memoir of her stay in a mental hospital during the late '60s, stars Winona Ryder as Kaysen, Vanessa Redgrave as chief psychiatrist and Whoopi Goldberg as ward nurse. James Mangold directs. October release.

"The Green Mile," based on Stephen King's 1996 novel, is set on death row in 1935. Frank Darabont, who directed "The Shawshank Redemption" from a King novella, directs, and Tom Banks stars. December release.

"The Cider House Rules" by John Irving, with Lasse Hallstrom directing from Irving's screenplay, is tentatively scheduled for fall release. Michael Caine stars.

"A Slipping-Down Life," from the Anne Tyler novel, is about a teenager (Lili Taylor) who carves the name of a rock star on her forehead. The movie premieres at Sundance. Tyler's "Earthly Possessions" will air on HBO in March.

Suzanne Mantell can be reached as bookz2moviez@earthlink.net.

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FALL SNEAKS; I Made Most of It Up, Honest; The author of the 'Fight Club' book offers his reflections on the seeming unreality of it all, the free meals and the violent deaths.; [Home Edition]

CHUCK PALAHNIUK. **Los Angeles Times**. Los Angeles, Calif.: Sep 12, 1999. pg. 8

Abstract (Summary)

I'm the guy who wrote that book. The "Fight Club" book. Because there's a scene in the book where a loyal waiter, a member of the fight club cult, serves the narrator free food. Where now in the movie, Edward Norton and Helena Bonham Carter get free food.

Another pack of letters arrives care of my publisher, from young men telling me they've gone to fight clubs in New Jersey and London and Spokane. Telling me about their fathers. In today's mail are wristwatches, lapel pins and coffee mugs, prizes from the sweepstakes my father enters my siblings and me in every winter.

Parts of "Fight Club" have always been true. It's less a novel than an anthology of my friends' lives. I do have insomnia and wander with no sleep for weeks, like Jack. Angry waiters I know mess with food. They shave their heads. My friend Alice makes soap. My friend Mike cuts single frames of smut into family features. Every guy I know feels let down by his father. Even my father feels let down by his father.

Full Text (1573 words)

Another waiter has just served me another free meal because I'm "that guy."

I'm the guy who wrote that book. The "Fight Club" book. Because there's a scene in the book where a loyal waiter, a member of the fight club cult, serves the narrator free food. Where now in the movie, Edward Norton and Helena Bonham Carter get free food.

Then a magazine editor, another magazine editor, calls me, angry and ranting because he wants to send a writer to the underground fight club in his area.

"It's cool, man," he says from New York. "You can tell me where. We won't screw it up."

I tell him there's no such place. There's no secret society of clubs where guys bash each other and gripe about their empty lives, their hollow careers, their absent fathers. Fight clubs are make-believe. You can't go there. I made them up.

"OK," he's saying. "Be that way. If you don't trust us, then to hell with you."

Another pack of letters arrives care of my publisher, from young men telling me they've gone to fight clubs in New Jersey and London and Spokane. Telling me about their fathers. In today's mail are wristwatches, lapel pins and coffee mugs, prizes from the sweepstakes my father enters my siblings and me in every winter.

Parts of "Fight Club" have always been true. It's less a novel than an anthology of my friends' lives. I do have insomnia and wander with no sleep for weeks, like Jack. Angry waiters I know mess with food. They shave their heads. My friend Alice makes soap. My friend Mike cuts single frames of smut into family features. Every guy I know feels let down by his father. Even my father feels let down by his father.

But now, more and more, what little was fiction is becoming reality.

The night before I mailed the manuscript to an agent in 1995, when it was just a couple hundred sheets of paper, a friend joked that she wanted to meet Brad Pitt.

I joked that I wanted to leave my job working on diesel trucks all day.

Now those pages are a movie starring Pitt and Norton and Bonham Carter, directed by David Fincher. (The film opens Oct. 15.) Now I'm unemployed.

Twentieth Century Fox let me bring some friends down to the shoot last summer, and every morning we ate at the same cafe in Santa Monica. Every breakfast, we got the same waiter, Charlie, with his movie-star looks and thick hair, until the last morning we were in town. That morning, Charlie walked out of the kitchen with his head shaved. Charlie was in the movie. My friends who'd been anarchist waiters with shaved heads were now being served eggs by a real waiter who was an actor who was playing a fake anarchist waiter with a shaved head.

It's that same feeling when you get between two mirrors in the barber shop and you can see your reflection of your reflection of your reflection going off into infinity.

Now waiters are refusing my money. Editors are grousing. Guys take me aside at bookstore events and beg to know where the local club meets.

Women ask, quiet and serious, "Is there a club like this for women?"

A late-night fight club where you can tag some stranger in the crowd and then slug it out until one of you drops. These young women say, "Yeah, I really, really need to go to something like this."

A German friend of mine, Carston, learned to speak English in only funny outdated cliches. For him, every party was an "all-singing, all-dancing extravaganza."

Now Carston's clumsy pigeon words are coming out of Pitt's mouth, 40 feet high, in front of millions of people. My friend Jeff's trashed ghetto kitchen is re-created in a Hollywood sound stage. The night I went to save my friend Kevin from a Xanax overdose is now Brad rushing to save Helena.

Everything is funnier in retrospect, funnier and prettier and cooler. You can laugh at anything from far enough away.

The story is no longer my story. It's David Fincher's. The set for Edward Norton's yuppie condo is a re-creation of an apartment from David's past. Edward wrote and rewrote his own lines. Brad chipped his teeth and shaved his head. My boss thinks the story is about how he struggles to please his demanding boss. My father thought the story was about his absent father, my grandfather, who killed his wife and himself with a shotgun.

My father was 4 in 1943 when he hid under a bed as his parents fought, and his 12 brothers and sisters ran into the woods. Then his mother was dead, and his father stamped around the house looking for him, calling for him, still carrying the shotgun.

My father remembers the boots stamping past the bed and the barrel of the shotgun trailing along near the floor. Then he remembers pouring buckets of sawdust on the bodies, to protect them from wasps and flies.

The book, and now the movie, is a product of all these people. And, with everything added to it, the "Fight Club" story becomes stronger, cleaner, not just the record of one life, but of a generation. Not just of a generation, but of men.

The book is the product of Nora Ephron and Thom Jones and Mark Richard and Joan Didion, Amy Hemple and Bret Ellis and Denis Johnson, because those are the people I read.

*

And now most of my old friends, Jeff and Carston and Alice are moved away, gone, married, dead, graduated, back in school, raising children. This summer, someone murdered my father in the mountains of Idaho and burned his body down to a few pounds of bone. The police say they have no real suspects. He was 59.

The news came on a Friday morning, through my publicist who'd been called by the Latah County sheriff's office, who'd found me through my publisher on the Internet. The poor publicist called me and said, "This might be some kind of sick joke, but you need to call a detective in Moscow, Idaho."

Now here I sit with a table full of food, and you'd think free bento and free fish would taste great, but that's not always the case.

I still wander at night.

All that's left is a book, and now a movie, a funny, exciting movie. A wild, excellent movie full of dangerous, scary ideas. What for other people will be a whiplash carnival ride, for my friends and me, is a nostalgic scrapbook. A reminder. Amazing, reassuring proof that our anger, our disappointment, our striving and resentment unite us with each other, and now with the world.

What's left is proof we can create reality.

Frieda, the woman who shaved Brad's head, promised me the hair for my Christmas cards, but then she forgot, so I trimmed a friend's golden retriever. Another woman, a friend of my father, calls me, frantic. She's sure the white supremacists killed him, and she wants to "go under deep cover" into their world around Hayden Lake and Butler Lake, Idaho. She wants me to go along and "act as backup." To "cover her."

So my adventures continue. I will go into the Idaho panhandle. Or I will sit at home like the police want, take Zoloft and wait for them to call.

Or, I don't know.

My father was a sweepstakes junkie, and every week small prizes still arrive in the mail. Wristwatches, coffee mugs, golf towels, calendars--never the big prizes, the cars or boats, this is the little stuff. Another friend, Jennifer, just lost her father to cancer, and she gets the same kind of little prizes from contests he entered her in months ago. Necklaces, soup mix, taco sauce and every time one arrives--video games, toothbrushes--her heart breaks.

Consolation prizes.

A few nights before my father died, he and I talked long-distance for three hours about a treehouse he'd built my brother and me. We talked about a batch of chickens I'm raising, how to build them a coop, and if the laying box for each hen should have a wire mesh floor.

And he said, no. A chicken would not poop in its nest.

We talked about the weather, how cold it was at night. He said how in the woods where he lived, the wild turkeys had just hatched their chicks, and he told me how each tom turkey would open its wings at dusk and gather in all its young. Because they were too large for the hen to protect. To keep them warm.

I told him no male animal could ever be that nurturing.

Now my father's dead, and my hens have their nests.

And now it seems that both he and I were wrong.

[Illustration]
CAPTION: PHOTO: Palahniuk in his Portland, Ore., office: "Parts of 'Fight Club' have always been true. It's less a novel than an anthology of my friends' lives."; PHOTOGRAPHER: JOHN GRESS / For The Times; PHOTO: Brad Pitt plays a brawler in the film version of Palahniuk's "Fight Club."; PHOTOGRAPHER: MERRICK MORTON; PHOTO: Brad Pitt, left, and Edward Norton hash things out in "Fight Club."; PHOTOGRAPHER: MERRICK MORTON

Credit: Chuck Palahniuk is the author of the novels "The Fight Club" (1996), "Survivor" (1999) and "Invisible Monsters," now in bookstores. All were published by Norton

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Databases selected: Multiple databases...

Movie Review; The Roundhouse Miss; 'Fight Club,' alternating between sheer tedium and churning violence, has a bigger misguided idea at its core.; [Home Edition]

KENNETH TURAN. **Los Angeles Times**. Los Angeles, Calif.: Oct 15, 1999. pg. 1

Abstract (Summary)

Director David Fincher, with "Alien3," "The Game" and "Seven" in his past, is one of cinema's premier brutalizers, able to impale audiences on meat hooks and make them like it. So it's no surprise that "Fight Club's" level of visceral violence, its stomach-turning string of bloody and protracted bare-knuckles brawls, make it more than worthy of an NC-17 if the MPAA could ever work up the nerve (don't hold your breath) to give that rating to a major studio film.

What is a surprise is how much of "Fight Club" is simply tedious. It's not just the crack-brained nature of its core premise, that what every man wants, needs and appreciates in his heart of hearts is the chance to get kicked, gouged and severely beaten by another guy. It's also the windy attempts at pseudo-profundity in Jim Uhls' adaptation of Chuck Palahniuk's novel, the feeble dime-store nihilism on the order of "It's only after you've lost everything that you're free to do anything."

"Fight Club" opens with its two protagonists in a moment of crisis: Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt) has shoved a revolver down the throat of the nameless narrator the film sometimes calls Jack (Edward Norton) as both men occupy what Jack calls "front row seats for the theater of mass destruction."

Full Text (1046 words)

"Fight Club," a film about men who like to fight, is an unsettling experience, but not the way anyone intended. What's most troubling about this witless mishmash of whiny, infantile philosophizing and bone-crunching violence is the increasing realization that it actually thinks it's saying something of significance. That is a scary notion indeed.

Director David Fincher, with "Alien3," "The Game" and "Seven" in his past, is one of cinema's premier brutalizers, able to impale audiences on meat hooks and make them like it. So it's no surprise that "Fight Club's" level of visceral violence, its stomach-turning string of bloody and protracted bare-knuckles brawls, make it more than worthy of an NC-17 if the MPAA could ever work up the nerve (don't hold your breath) to give that rating to a major studio film.

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An extensive flashback is clearly in order, and it begins with Jack's numbing life as a bland, robotic numbers-cruncher for a major auto maker whose job it is to determine how many deaths it takes to make it financially prudent to call for a product recall. (Protean actor Norton can disappear into anyone, but the spectacle of him disappearing into a barely-alive nobody is not particularly gratifying.)

Living in an apartment tower he characterizes as "a filing cabinet for widows and young professionals," Jack divides his time between two preoccupations. He compulsively shops for home furnishings ("We used to read pornography;

now it's the Horchow Collection") and, unable to sleep, he attends touchy-feely support group sessions for people with life-threatening diseases. Here he meets Marla Singer (Helena Bonham Carter, as far as you can get from her Merchant Ivory past), a fellow faker with ratty hair and a rattier, cigarettes-and- cheap-jewelery lifestyle who lives as if, yes, "we might die at any moment."

These initial parts of "Fight Club" are structured in part as satires on the modern mania for consumerism and the cult of New Age sensitivity. Certainly these areas are ripe for sending up, but this film is so contemptuous of anything human, so eager to employ know- it-all smugness, that the cure plays worse than the disease.

It's on an airplane that Jack runs into Durden, a primeval savant whose business is soap but whose wild red jacket and matching sunglasses mark him as a kind of walking id. Durden, we admiringly come to discover, spends his spare time splicing frames of pornography into family films (how brave! how iconoclastic!) and serving as "a guerrilla terrorist in the food service industry," fouling various foods with his own bodily fluids. Is it any wonder both the film and Jack view him as a truth-telling avatar of compelling frankness?

Soon the two men are living together in a dilapidated hovel (no consumerism for them) that looks like a slum the Addams family happily abandoned and Jack is absorbing Durden's bracing bons mots about the state of the American male, variously called "a generation of men raised by women" and "slaves with white collars." "Our great war," Durden all but preaches, "is a spiritual war, our Great Depression is our lives."

(In one of the more curious footnotes to modern culture, "Fight Club" plays at times like the bombastic World Wrestling Federation version of Susan Faludi's "Stiffed," also a treatise on men who have "lost their compass in the world" and suffer from "the American masculinity crisis.")

Tyler's answer to this malaise is Fight Club, where strangers find that savagely beating each other is such a cathartic, practically religious experience that guys are, well, fighting to get in. While both Tyler ("I don't want to die without any scars") and Jack ("You weren't alive anywhere like you were there. . . . After fighting everything else in your life is like the volume turned down") are capable of extended neo-macho riffs on the virtues of Fight Club, that doesn't prevent the whole concept from playing like the delusional rantings of testosterone-addicted thugs.

Tyler keeps upping the ante for the men he recruits, turning Fight Club habitues into an organized mob of nihilistic bad boys wrecking havoc on our puny, emasculated civilization. Though the film employs dubious plot twists to quasi-distance itself from the weirder implications of a philosophy the Columbine gunmen would likely have found congenial, it's to little effect. Aside from the protracted beatings, this film is so vacuous and empty it's more depressing than provocative. If the first rule of Fight Club is "Nobody talks about Fight Club," a fitting subsection might be "Why would anyone want to?"

* MPAA rating: R, for disturbing and graphic depiction of violent antisocial behavior, sexuality and language. Times guidelines: numerous exceptionally graphic beatings and brief glimpses of a naked male sexual organ.

'Fight Club'

Edward Norton: Narrator

Brad Pitt: Tyler Durden

Helena Bonham Carter: Marla Singer

Meat Loaf Aday: Robert Paulsen

Jared Leto: Angel Face

Fox 2000 Pictures and Regency Enterprises present a Linson Films production, released by 20th Century Fox. Director David Fincher. Producers Art Linson, Cean Chaffin, Ross Grayson Bell. Executive producer Arnon Milchan. Screenplay Jim Uhls, based on the novel by Chuck Palahniuk. Cinematographer Jeff Cronenweth. Editor James Haygood. Costumes Michael Kaplan. Music the Dust Brothers. Production design Alex McDowell. Art director Chris Gorak. Set decorator Jay R. Hart. Running time: 2 hours, 19 minutes.

In general release.

[Illustration]
Caption: PHOTO: Brad Pitt, left, lures Edward Norton into trying a rugged kind of therapy in David Fincher's dark drama of dime-store nihilism, "Fight Club."; PHOTOGRAPHER: MERRICK MORTON

Credit: TIMES FILM CRITIC

Indexing (document details)

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COMPANY TOWN; The Biz; Controversy Could KO or Punch Up 'Fight Club'; [Home Edition]

CLAUDIA ELLER. **Los Angeles Times**. Los Angeles, Calif.: Oct 15, 1999. pg. 1

Abstract (Summary)

No one in Hollywood doubts that 20th Century Fox's "Fight Club," starring Brad Pitt and Edward Norton, will have a strong opening this weekend--estimates range from $14 million to $17 million. But many believe the movie will face an uphill battle sustaining itself in the marketplace and appealing to people beyond its hard-core audience of 18-to-30-year-old males due to its graphically violent content.

Despite some critics praising the film as a groundbreaking masterpiece, "Fight Club" is being released at a sensitive time, with violence in entertainment a major flash point in Washington. In the wake of the Columbine massacre and other violent outbreaks around the country, Congress has been considering ways to regulate violence in entertainment. In June, President Clinton ordered a federal probe into how entertainment markets its movies, music and video games.

"I think the movie is very, very intense in its ideas and the way they're presented, and people mistake that for violence," said Laura Ziskin, who as head of the studio's movie label Fox 2000 was the executive who four years ago bought and developed Chuck Palahniuk's book on which the movie is based.

Full Text (1155 words)

The one sure thing that David Fincher's $68-million movie "Fight Club" has going for it, or against it, is controversy.

According to movie marketing experts, the free publicity that the film is generating can either help or impair a film's ultimate box- office performance.

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"Fight Club" may be the most violent mainstream-studio movie released since the Columbine tragedy.

Fox naturally chose not to play up the violence in its marketing materials, which some competitors regard as misleading advertising. Instead, the company is focusing on the film's cinematic achievements, its originality and larger themes.

"Audiences are saying, 'Give us something original,' " said Fox marketing chief Bob Harper. "This is not a movie that's been made five other times. It's unique, distinct and intelligent, and the biggest marketing tool in its post-opening will be that it's something riveting and important to talk about."

Fox executives are hoping audiences will look below the surface and connect with the film's satirical, existential themes and overarching comment on the modern world and the dehumanizing influences of such things as consumerism.

"I think the movie is very, very intense in its ideas and the way they're presented, and people mistake that for violence," said Laura Ziskin, who as head of the studio's movie label Fox 2000 was the executive who four years ago bought and developed Chuck Palahniuk's book on which the movie is based.

With a script by first-timer Jim Uhls, "Fight Club" stars Norton as an alienated white-collar drone stuck in a meaningless job at a big car company. He befriends a freaky, charismatic loner (Pitt) who lives in a dilapidated mansion where he makes strange soap.

The two begin an underground fight club, where disaffected men like themselves take out their pent-up aggressions by beating up one another bare-fisted as a way of emancipating themselves from the numbness of contemporary life.

Fox's movie chairman Bill Mechanic said boxing classics such as "Raging Bull" and "Rocky," and certainly many war films, are much more graphic than "Fight Club," which he doesn't see as a violent movie.

Mechanic said the fact that Ziskin was the one who championed and developed the movie indicates that "Fight Club" won't turn away most women as some people are speculating.

"I'm interested in what it has to say about men and society at large," said Ziskin, "and why we have all these [material] things and still feel numb and can't sleep at night."

Still, Fox executives are well aware that their unconventionalmovie--which was co-financed by Arnon Milchan's New Regency Productions--won't appeal to everyone. Those who have seen this film tend to either love or hate it. The New Yorker critic David Denby called it "a fascist rhapsody posing as a metaphor of liberation," while Rolling Stone reviewer Peter Travers called it "groundbreaking."

Mechanic said: "It's an us-versus-them movie. It's certainly not a middle-of-the-road movie. . . . We didn't make it for everyone."

Mechanic remains convinced that the film could do enough business to make it a hit.

"We didn't make it as a noncommercial movie. The fact that we made it at the price we did, we had the inherent belief that it would attract a big enough audience to turn a profit," the Fox chairman said.

The film's success will ultimately depend on word of mouth. If the movie doesn't satisfy enough of the audience, no degree of controversy or publicity will help sell tickets.

Mechanic readily admits that "Fight Club" was a big, expensive risk for Fox. But at the same time, he's proud that "it's one of the more interesting movies" to be made during "a kind of adventurous period at the studios," which lately have backed such movies as "American Beauty" and "Three Kings."

The fact that "Fight Club" was made at all is credited to the late Fox executive Raymond Bongiovanni, who headed the New York office of Fox 2000 and sent the book to Ziskin and her then top executive, Kevin McCormick (now at Warner Bros.), in the fall of 1995.

"Raymond called us one morning and said he had been up all night reading this book and we should read it," said Ziskin, recalling how 36 hours later she was sitting "on the edge of my bed in the middle of the night reading dialogue out loud to [her screenwriter husband] Alvin [Sargent], thinking, 'This is amazing.' "

A week later, when Fox optioned the book for $10,000, Ziskin admits, "Quite honestly, I didn't know how we'd make the movie, but I did think at the very least that underground fighting was a commercial idea."

McCormick sent the book to various producers, among them Art Linson, and Josh Donen and his partner, Ross Bell, who jumped on it.

"I read the book overnight, and halfway through, I thought it was too dark," Bell said. "Then I came to the reveal [or hook], and I knew there was a movie there."

Bell and Donen (who left producing to become an agent before the movie was made) sent the book to Fincher, with whom the producers had another project at TriStar Pictures. The director, whose credits include the dark thriller "Seven," "Alien 3" and "The Game," loved the book.

Bell also hooked up Fincher with writer Uhls before Linson took over producing responsibilities. (Bell, Linson and Cean Chaffin are the credited producers.)

Uhls recalled: "There were concerns about how the movie would be made. . . . The book is dreamlike. It's a first-person rant by the central character. My job was to flesh it out into scenes and have the characters act in a way more fully realized."

Uhls added that everyone on the creative team and at the studio was "aware that we were doing something out of the mainstream of Hollywood storytelling, and that was exciting to all of us."

When Fincher signed on to the project, Ziskin said the movie "ratcheted up and got bigger," meaning what was originally conceived as a smaller, relatively low-cost movie evolved into a much more ambitious production.

[Illustration]
Caption: PHOTO: "Fight Club," starring Brad Pitt, left, has raised speculation that its violent content will hurt revenue.; PHOTOGRAPHER: 20th Century Fox

Indexing (document details)

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ProQuest

Databases selected: Multiple databases...

Giving / A weekly look at those who help.; Justice for All; When the poor of Los Angeles are victimized by con artists and illegal business practices, they turn to Bet Tzedek.; [Home Edition]

BETTIJANE LEVINE. **Los Angeles Times**. Los Angeles, Calif.: Nov 2, 1999. pg. 1

Abstract (Summary)

It took the lawyers of Bet Tzedek, which offers free legal services to the poor, to unravel the man's tortured tale. Yes, he had lived in that house with his mother all his life. And, yes, he became the home's owner when she died.

Bet Tzedek handles about 10,000 cases each year--cases of poor people who have been swindled, defrauded, abused, denied benefits they deserve, wrongfully evicted from apartments or nursing homes; people who plunk down life savings to buy a car and then find out they are only leasing it. The list of legal atrocities seems endless, and [David] Lash, 44, says it is. Each year brings new variations: people wasting away because they aren't fed properly at nursing homes, young families who rent apartments that appear clean but find out they are dangerously unsafe or infested after moving in.

To succeed in this cause, lawyers must be willing to work on Bet Tzedek's staff for salaries that are one-third to one-half of what they would earn in private practice. And lawyers in private practice must be willing to volunteer many hours to Bet Tzedek's clients for no fee. Paralegals and office support staff must forgo the prestige and higher salaries they might find elsewhere for the deep satisfaction they say they can only derive in a place like this. Although the name and origins of the organization are Jewish, many lawyers and support staff--and the majority of Bet Tzedek clients-- are not.

Full Text (1371 words)

Southern California Rating:

FICTION

1 HARRY POTTER AND THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS by J.K. Rowling (Arthur A. Levine Books: $17.95) Harry risks his life to solve a mystery at the Hogwarts School.

Last Week: --; Weeks on List: 1

2 HARRY POTTER AND THE PRISONER OF AZKABAN by J.K. Rowling (Scholastic: $19.95) Sirius Black--an escaped convict--is on the loose, and he's after Harry.

Last Week: --; Weeks on List: 1

3 PERSONAL INJURIES by Scott Turow (Farrar, Straus & Giroux: $27) Dirty lawyers, dirty judges and one equally soiled informant face off in fictional Kindle County.

Last Week: 2; Weeks on List: 2

4 HARRY POTTER AND THE SORCERER'S STONE by J.K. Rowling (Scholastic: $16.95) Unhappy at home, a young boy discovers that he is a great magician.

Last Week: --; Weeks on List: 1

5 SECOND WIND by Dick Francis (Putnam: $24.95) When a meteorologist and a pilot decide to fly through the eye of a hurricane, intrigue is not far behind.

Last Week: --; Weeks on List: 1

6 BAGOMBO SNUFF BOX by Kurt Vonnegut (Putnam: $24.95) Twenty- four magazine stories, from the 1950s to the present, are collected here for the first time.

Last Week: 1; Weeks on List: 6

7 HARD TIME by Sara Paretsky (Delacorte: $24.95) When V.I. Warshawski nearly runs over an escaped convict, she finds herself framed for murder.

Last Week: --; Weeks on List: 1

8 THE CHARTERHOUSE OF PARMA by Stendhal; Translated from the French by Richard Howard (The Modern Library: $24.95) A new translation of love and war in the Napoleonic era.

Last Week: 11; Weeks on List: 2

9 THE HOURS by Michael Cunningham (Farrar, Straus & Giroux: $22) A haunting triptych of stories structured around Virginia Woolf's novel "Mrs. Dalloway."

Last Week: 8; Weeks on List: 27

10 THE COMING OF THE NIGHT by John Rechy (Grove Press: $24) A day and night in the lives of hustlers and other outcasts looking for love on L.A.'s seamier side.

Last Week: 5; Weeks on List: 4

11 PLAINSONG by Kent Haruf (Alfred A. Knopf: $24) As lives intersect in a Colorado cattle town, concepts of family are challenged. Reviewed by Susan Salter Reynolds, Page 15.

Last Week: --; Weeks on List: 1

12 A WALK TO REMEMBER by Nicholas Sparks (Warner: $19.95) An old man looks back at his own bittersweet love story from the vantage point that 40 years can offer.

Last Week: --; Weeks on List: 1

13 DAUGHTER OF FORTUNE by Isabel Allende (HarperCollins: $26) A young woman escapes from the bonds of her youthful passion to Gold Rush California.

Last Week: --; Weeks on List: 1

14 ESCAPE FROM FILM SCHOOL by Richard Walter (St. Martin's: $22.95) A young man makes it in Hollywood; a first novel by the chair of UCLA's film- and television-writing program.

Last Week: --; Weeks on List: 1

15 HEADLONG by Michael Frayn (Metropolitan: $26) On vacation in the English countryside, an art historian thinks he has stumbled upon a lost Bruegel painting.

Last Week: --; Weeks on List: 1

NONFICTION

1 'TIS by Frank McCourt (Scribner: $26) A young McCourt arrives from Ireland in New York, with all its peril and promise, in this sequel to "Angela's Ashes."

Last Week: 1; Weeks on List: 3

2 THE WAY WE LIVED THEN by Dominick Dunne (Crown: $27.50) A personal photo album and memoir of Hollywood by a self-proclaimed name-dropper.

Last Week: 3; Weeks on List: 2

3 DUTCH by Edmund Morris (Random House: $35) This long- anticipated official biography of President Reagan features a fictionalized narrator.

Last Week: 2; Weeks on List: 2

4 THE MILLION DOLLAR MERMAID by Esther Williams with Digby Diehl (Simon & Schuster: $26) Behind-the-scenes gossip at MGM, as told by the queen of "swimming musicals."

Last Week: --; Weeks on List: 3

5 THE PLAY GOES ON by Neil Simon (Simon & Schuster: $27) A memoir of the second half of life by one of America's most prolific playwrights.

Last Week: 11; Weeks on List: 2

6 HITLER'S POPE by John Cornwell (Viking: $29.95) How Pius XII's efforts at diplomacy helped sweep the Nazis into power and carry out the Final Solution.

Last Week: 10; Weeks on List: 2

7 ALL THE BEST by George Bush (Scribner: $30) Autobiography by documentation: a collection of writings, speeches, diary entries and other contributions by the former president.

Last Week: --; Weeks on List: 1

8 TUESDAYS WITH MORRIE by Mitch Albom (Doubleday: $19.95) A sportswriter's empowering story about his weekly visits to see an older dying friend.

Last Week: 6; Weeks on List: 91

9 STIFFED by Susan Faludi (William Morrow: $27.50) From Sylvester Stallone to the Spur Posse, a look at the plight of the American male.

Last Week: 9; Weeks on List: 2

10 FAITH OF MY FATHERS by John McCain (Random House: $25) A self- described hell-raiser, the Arizona senator rebelled in the U.S. Naval Academy but found maturity in Vietnam.

Last Week: 8; Weeks on List: 5

11 THE OTHER SIDE AND BACK by Sylvia Browne (Dutton: $23.95) The author of "Adventures of a Psychic" explores the existence of angels, ghosts and the afterlife.

Last Week: --; Weeks on List: 7

12 LEGACY by Christopher Ogden (Little, Brown: $29.95) The rags- to-riches-to-ruin-to-riches story of Moses Annenberg and his son, TV Guide founder Walter.

Last Week: 7; Weeks on List: 2

13 THE GREATEST GENERATION by Tom Brokaw (Random House: $24.95) TV anchor tells the stories of the generation that came of age during the Depression and World War II.

Last Week: --; Weeks on List: 43

14 THE HUNGRY OCEAN by Linda Greenlaw (Little, Brown: $22.95) A chronicle of a monthlong fishing trip by the world's only female swordfish boat captain.

Last Week: --; Weeks on List: 9

15 ISAAC'S STORM by Erik Larson (Crown: $25) The engrossing tale of a hurricane that slammed into Galveston in 1900 and of a weather forecaster heralded as a hero.

Last Week: 14; Weeks on List: 5

PAPERBACKS

FICTION

1 HARRY POTTER AND THE SORCERER'S STONE by J.K. Rowling (Scholastic: $16.95) A boy learns he is a magician.

2 THE POISONWOOD BIBLE by Barbara Kingsolver (HarperPerennial: $14) A missionary family's ordeals.

3 A MAN IN FULL by Tom Wolfe (Bantam: $8.50) The story of a real estate tycoon's crash and burn.

4 MEMOIRS OF A GEISHA by Arthur Golden (Vintage: $14) The life and loves of a teahouse entertainer in Kyoto.

5 BILLY STRAIGHT by Jonathan Kellerman (Ballantine: $7.99) A detective races to find a young murder witness.

6 THE SIMPLE TRUTH by David Balducci (Warner: $7.99) A convicted killer finds out he's not guilty.

7 INVISIBLE MONSTERS by Chuck Palahniuk (W.W. Norton: $13) A fashion model loses half her face.

8 FIGHT CLUB by Chuck Palahniuk (Henry Holt: $13) Unwind from a day at the office with blood sport and anarchy.

9 TROUBLE IN PARADISE by Robert B. Parker (Jove: $6.99) Paradise Police Chief Jesse Stone has his hands full.

10 WHEN THE WIND BLOWS by James Patterson (Warner Books: $7.99) Genetic experiments in the Colorado hinterlands.

PAPERBACKS

NONFICTION

1 ANGELA'S ASHES by Frank McCourt (Touchstone: $14) Overcoming an Irish childhood during the Depression.

2 THE PROFESSOR AND THE MADMAN by Simon Winchester (HarperPerennial: $13) A madman with a flair for words.

3 BLIND MAN'S BLUFF by Sherry Sontag and Christopher Drew (HarperPerennial: $7.99) American submarine espionage.

4 SEAT OF THE SOUL by Gary Zukav (Fireside: $13) The inward transformation of the human soul.

5 GUNS, GERMS AND STEEL by Jared Diamond (W.W. Norton: $14.95) The part played by this triad in history.

6 LIVING JUDAISM by Wayne D. Dosick (HarperSan Francisco: $13) A guide to Jewish beliefs, traditions and practice.

7 THE OLD FARMERS ALMANAC 2000 Edited by Judson Hale (Villard: $5.95) Weather forecasts, tide tables and more.

8 REWRITES by Neil Simon (Touchstone: $14) A memoir of the playwright's early career.

9 REAL BOYS by William Pollack (Owl Books: $13.95) Raising a healthy male child in spite of society's mixed messages.

10 MIDNIGHT IN THE GARDEN OF GOOD AND EVIL by John Berendt (Vintage: $12) Portrait of Savannah's colorful eccentrics.

*

Rankings are based on a Times poll of Southland bookstores.

[Reference]
Message No: 93680

Indexing (document details)

Subjects: Justice, Low income groups, Fraud, Victims of crime, Legal services

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ProQuest

Databases selected: Multiple databases...

A Punch Line and an Exit; With its leader's departure, the prank- pulling L.A. Cacophony Society is at a crossroads.; [Home Edition]

HILARY E. MacGREGOR. **Los Angeles Times**. Los Angeles, Calif.: Feb 7, 2002. pg. E.1

Abstract (Summary)

Last spring, Al Ridenour, a.k.a. "Reverend Al," stepped down from his post as Grand Instigator and Supreme Leader. "I felt that the original iconoclastic energy had given way to timeworn jokes and stale excuses for socializing," Ridenour, 40, said recently over a sandwich at Philippe's French Dip, a favorite cacophonist gathering spot because of the clown photos that adorn one wall. Clowns are icons for cacophonists, who aspire to "live life as fools."

The history of the Cacophony Society, which exists for the most part as an oral tradition, is as slippery as a water-logged rat skittering through a maze of city drainage tunnels--something local cacophonists have been known to do. The group was founded 15 years ago in San Francisco. Ridenour discovered Cacophony in 1991 and decided to import it to L.A. He planned a bogus UFO landing. At a local convocation of saucerheads, Ridenour passed out fliers announcing the landing at a beachfront park.

Sometime around fall of 2000, Ridenour just seemed to lose steam. The Web postings grew old, the activities petered out. Then, in perhaps the ultimate cacophonist act, he turned the group's philosophy upon itself and pranked his fellow cacophonists. "I wanted it to go down in a fireball," Ridenour said. "I wanted it to end. I looked at cacophony as a big theatrical extravaganza, so I wanted a big end to it all."

Full Text (1870 words)

On a sunny weekend afternoon, the members of the Los Angeles Cacophony Society sit in semi-darkness beneath the old pinatas at a Highland Park bar called Mr. T's. This is their first meeting of 2002, their first gathering in at least four months. They are here to pick up the pieces.

Cacophonists are part of a loose network of underground societies, with "lodges" in about a dozen U.S. cities. For the last decade, the L.A. group has been one of the most active in the country.

But last spring, Al Ridenour, a.k.a. "Reverend Al," stepped down from his post as Grand Instigator and Supreme Leader. "I felt that the original iconoclastic energy had given way to timeworn jokes and stale excuses for socializing," Ridenour, 40, said recently over a sandwich at Philippe's French Dip, a favorite cacophonist gathering spot because of the clown photos that adorn one wall. Clowns are icons for cacophonists, who aspire to "live life as fools."

In the last 10 years, many of the original members have mellowed as they reach their 40s. The world has grown more corporate, and the corporations quickly co-opt underground movements. Furthermore, some once-thrilling ideas--such as unfurling a "Just Quit" sign at Mile 22 of the marathon and offering tired runners doughnuts, beer, cigarettes and beef jerky--have become humdrum.

At this meeting, on a Saturday in January, the cacophonists are in the midst of an existential crisis: Can they carry on without their leader, or are they aimless, as lost as the Merry Pranksters without Ken Kesey?

*

"Cacophony Societies are disorganized groups of klowns, guerrilla artists, kitsch hounds, slackers and noisemakers in search of experiences beyond the mainstream.... We go wherever there are some raw materials from which we can make our dada.... You may already be a member."

--From the Los Angeles Cacophony Society Web site, at la.cacophony.org.

L.A. cacophonists have staged Laundromat poetry readings, picnics on earthquake faults and field trips to cryonics companies.

At the L.A. Pet Cemetery in Calabasas they have visited the markers of luminaries ranging from Tom Mix's horse, Tony, to Blinkey, the frozen chicken interred by artist Jeffrey Vallance. They have parodied far-out theories about the Kennedy assassination, holding what they called "an unprecedented orgy of paranoia and disinformation." True to their anticonsumerist underpinnings, they have engaged in reverse shoplifting, planting everything from "Bobbitt dog chews" to Cement-Cuddlers--teddy bears filled with cement--in various retail outlets, only to watch as confused cashiers would struggle to ring up the strange merchandise.

One time a group of the urban pranksters descended on Universal Studios' squeaky-clean CityWalk Mall sporting tattered garments they had barbecued in a park the day before. CityWalk should reflect L.A.'s apocalyptic soul, they reasoned, including its poverty and grit. Unfortunately, visitors just assumed the cadre of charred outcasts were human billboards for the "Backdraft" ride.

"We subvert prime-time reality," said cacophonist Robert Moss, 45, a part-time actor and computer consultant. "When we rent a club and put on a show, that's fun, too. But the real nut of Cacophony is going out in public places--where everyone goes and knows what to expect--and doing pranks."

The history of the Cacophony Society, which exists for the most part as an oral tradition, is as slippery as a water-logged rat skittering through a maze of city drainage tunnels--something local cacophonists have been known to do. The group was founded 15 years ago in San Francisco. Ridenour discovered Cacophony in 1991 and decided to import it to L.A. He planned a bogus UFO landing. At a local convocation of saucerheads, Ridenour passed out fliers announcing the landing at a beachfront park.

Near the airport, Ridenour, who confesses a fascination with all things religious, staked out a giant landing pad, constructed a 20- foot foil cross, burned incense and decorated the scene with religious icons. He donned a clerical collar and called himself Rev. Al. The curious and crazy came, his nom de guerre stuck, and the Los Angeles Cacophony Society was born.

You may never have heard of the cacophonists, but you may have heard of some of the people and events they claim to have inspired. The list includes novelist Chuck Palahniuk, author of the anticonsumerist novel "Fight Club," who is said to have frequented meetings of the Portland Cacophony Society, the San Francisco event that was the precursor of Burning Man, and Santacon, the folkloric fatman frolic that originated in San Francisco nine years ago--and features squads of drunken Santas climbing on buses, going to strip clubs and engaging in other un-Santa-like behavior.

The cacophonists are part of an avant-garde tradition descended from Dada, the profoundly influential artistic movement that started in Zurich and swept Europe and the U.S. in the second and third decades of the 20th century in reaction to the social upheaval that followed World War I. Dadaists aimed to provoke. The spirit of Dada was in events: cabaret performances, demonstrations, declarations, confrontations, the distribution of leaflets and what we now call "guerrilla theater."

"It seems like they are in this tradition of cultural resistance, provocation, epater le bourgeoisie," said sociologist Jeffrey Halley, a professor at the University of Texas, San Antonio, who focuses on European and American avant-garde movements.

Unlike some of their predecessors, however, cacophonists are not political. "We are not anarchists. We are not left wing," Moss said. "We comment on culture."

Most, in fact, are products of the middle-class sensibility against which they rebel. Many work in obscure jobs on the edges of the entertainment industry. Cacophonist Eric Harris, a.k.a. Grammarian, described the group as "those guys in high school in the A.V. club, kind of nerdy, who bring the 16-millimeter film projector to class. Misfits."

Sociologists say marginal groups such as the cacophonists often serve an important social function, bringing attention to what one academic called "the details of domination" in the culture. That function, however, can often only be discerned in hindsight.

"They create ideas that are out there, waiting to be discovered," said Clarence Lo, a sociology professor at the University of Missouri who studies social movements. "The more groups like this, the more we begin to rethink those ... things we take for granted."

Halley agreed: "They are testifying to something about American society, and that is extremely important. As a reality, as a critique, as a record."

In its mid-1990s heyday, the Cacophony Society held two to four events a month. Ridenour estimates he spent 40 hours a week writing newsletters, distributing fliers and overseeing construction of elaborate papier mache props. He even transformed rooms of his house into impromptu theater spaces.

"This is a kind of war against the culture of buying Nikes and making your kids watch Barney," said Ridenour.

Eventually, Ridenour found it difficult to carry on his full- time job as an animator. He burned through his personal savings staging events. (He now works as a freelance journalist specializing in offbeat stories and occasionally writes for The Times.)

And the adrenaline rush began to wear off. Take Santacon. Once, the event was a handful of madmen in Santa suits, running the streets, risking arrest. Over time it grew into a multiple city happening--with hundreds of Santas roaming the streets not only around Los Angeles, but also in Portland, Brooklyn and even London. "In a weird way, it became traditional," Ridenour said. "It became too traditional. It became expected. It's like the anti-holiday that is everyone's holiday favorite."

Sometime around fall of 2000, Ridenour just seemed to lose steam. The Web postings grew old, the activities petered out. Then, in perhaps the ultimate cacophonist act, he turned the group's philosophy upon itself and pranked his fellow cacophonists. "I wanted it to go down in a fireball," Ridenour said. "I wanted it to end. I looked at cacophony as a big theatrical extravaganza, so I wanted a big end to it all."

So, after the final night of the Museum of Mental Decay, the cacophonists' twisted version of a Halloween haunted house, in October 2000, Ridenour reported on the group's Web site the grisly death of a member in a drunk driving accident. (That member had actually moved to New Orleans.) Professing pain and spiritual confusion, he faked his own conversion to "Christian anarchy."

Some members fell for the prank; chaos ensued. "I heard him say more than once he wanted to do a prank that would make the group self-destruct," said 42-year-old Al Guerrero, a.k.a. Al Pastor, Al Qaeda or Al Fresco. "We felt it was an aggressive act, an act of desperation, an act of finality. It was like an internal time bomb."

After that, "Rev. Al" went into retirement.

For months, until the meeting at Mr. T's, the group was in disarray.

In the bar's gloom, cacophonists lay their calendars on the table, scribble save-the-date notes and request volunteers. Numbering about 18, they could be PTA members divvying up duties for back-to-school night.

Out of the shadows wafted whispers of the subversive: How about a Mexican Night, with fake INS raids and faux day laborers? A field trip to L. Ron Hubbard's museum, in full nautical regalia? A weekend caravan of campers to bring paint and encouragement to Leonard Knight, who lives by the Salton Sea, painting a mountain of stone with Bible verses?

The freaks and misfits had their energy back. But few of the ideas were fresh. Most of the proposed events were staged performances, not the daring Dada to which cacophonists once aspired.

"That's something Rev. Al disliked," said Kim Cooper, Cacophony's newly appointed public relations person, invoking Ridenour as if he were Mao, Fidel or God. "The recycling of events."

Excited members called the recent meeting a renaissance.

Privately, though, some members concede Ridenour's concerns are legitimate. "As you age, you are not as daring," said Guerrero. "That's just a sign of growing up. There was a time when most of the events could get you arrested, or you would wind up running away from the police at the end."

No longer.

At the height of the controversy over the fate of Belmont Learning Complex, built on an environmentally suspect site downtown, Harris tried to plan a nighttime trip to the school to see if there really was toxic waste at the site, and to plant some if there wasn't. "We were going to break in, look inside the classrooms," Guerrero recalled. "But in the end it turned out people were just too nervous."

Joe Austin, a professor in the department of popular culture at Bowling Green State University, said the cacophonists' plight is not unusual. "Almost all avant-garde groups have some charismatic leader, living on the border of a self-destructive life because of what they are involved in. Usually there are a lot of other people in their wake, sort of like lieutenants and soldiers. But that immediately sets up the problem of reproduction. There is no one to take over after they get tired."

It may be too early to tell, but maybe the society's time has passed. As Halley, the Texas sociologist, put it: "They are not a movement, but a moment."

[Illustration]
Caption: PHOTO: (no caption); PHOTOGRAPHER: CLARENCE WILLIAMS / Los Angeles Times; PHOTO: (LA) (no caption)

Credit: TIMES STAFF WRITER

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Databases selected: Multiple databases...

Author's Angry Worlds Have a Cult Following; In the novel 'Lullaby,' words can kill, but they're author Chuck Palahniuk's real-life 'coping mechanisms'; [HOME EDITION]

SUSAN SALTER REYNOLDS. **Los Angeles Times**. Los Angeles, Calif.: Oct 6, 2002. pg. E.1

Abstract (Summary)

Many of [Chuck Palahniuk]'s five novels contain the idea that civilization must be destroyed before it can be cured of all its many evils. Palahniuk, who seems to have digested a lot of literary theory, attributes this to Foucault. "You have to offer a viable, spectacular third option somewhere between things remaining the same and violent change. Look at Y2K. Everyone was hoping something would change, but it didn't."

Palahniuk discusses his theories on society's ills over a plate of lettuce at a Westside restaurant. The restaurant is quiet. An old woman eats alone. A clock ticks. On the hour, a little band comes out and plays a show tune. Palahniuk is wearing khakis and a short- sleeved shirt tucked in. He sits so upright and attentive that one is instantly aware of one's own bad posture.

Chuck Palahniuk, 40, wrote "Fight Club," which was made into a movie. His current novel has garnered good reviews.; PHOTOGRAPHER: LORI SHEPLER / Los Angeles Times; "Without [anger], there's depression," Chuck Palahniuk says.; PHOTOGRAPHER: LORI SHEPLER / Los Angeles Times

Full Text (1044 words)

"You scare me," a visitor recently tells Chuck Palahniuk, author of the newly released "Lullaby: A Novel," and, more famously, 1996's "Fight Club," a cult novel that was made into a movie starring Brad Pitt and Edward Norton. He looks shocked and wounded.

And he should. Palahniuk, 40, is not a scary person. He is neat, almost fastidious in his appearance and manner. He speaks clearly in complete sentences and fully formed ideas. But the eyes give it away. The eyes are wild.

They are the eyes of the man who wrote in "Fight Club": "Pounding that kid, I really wanted to put a bullet between the eyes of every endangered panda that wouldn't screw to save its species and every whale or dolphin that gave up and ran itself aground. Don't think of this as extinction. Think of this as downsizing."

They are the eyes of the man who wrote in "Lullaby": "Spraying blood, Helen says, 'No, No, No!' and crawling through the sharp slivers of broken color, her voice thick and blurred from her ruined teeth, she grabs all the pieces. Sobbing, covered in bile and blood, the room stinking, she clutches the broken blue pieces. The hands and tiny feet, the crushed torso and dented head, she hugs them to her chest and screams, 'Oh, Patrick! Patty!' "

These are the kinds of passages that upset Lynne Cheney. They are also the kinds of passages that make "cult" authors out of plain, old fiction writers. What does it mean to be a cult writer? It means you have Web sites dedicated to your work, people who try to re- create the world you created, people who dress up and act out and reinterpret again and again the meaning of your words as they apply to their lives.

"That's just my friends Amy and Dave," Palahniuk jokes of the myriad places floating in cyberspace where you can read about him.

Well, shucks. Critics love him too. Kirkus Reviews let its hair down in an uncharacteristically chummy review. "Outrageous, darkly comic fun." And from Booklist: "It's a fun ride, but what separates this novel from Palahniuk's previous work is its emotional depth, its ability to explore the unbearable pain of losing a child just as richly as it laments our consume-or-die worldview."

"Lullaby" (Doubleday) has a totally engaging, thoroughly ingenious plot: There is a book, "Poems and Lullabies From Around the World," that contains poems to quiet children so they can sleep. It contains one lullaby (on page 27) that also kills them. The mysterious deaths are attributed to crib death.

It turns out, mild-mannered reporter Carl Streator learns, it also kills adults. All you have to do is think it and bam, that person's dead.

This poses a dilemma for Streator, a fairly angry person who frequently feels he would like to kill people (but not really kill them). He is forced to count vigorously to distract himself whenever he feels the poem coming on. Helen Hoover Boyle is a highly coiffed real estate agent who knows the secret too. Her assistant Mona is a lovely hippie into Wicca. Mona's boyfriend is an obnoxious hippie named Oyster who is the novel's main pedagogue.

Streator tries very hard not to kill him but ultimately does.

The four team up to round up all existing copies of the book in libraries around the country so they can destroy page 27. If the poem were actually printed in the book, it would, no doubt, strike fear in readers.

Many of Palahniuk's five novels contain the idea that civilization must be destroyed before it can be cured of all its many evils. Palahniuk, who seems to have digested a lot of literary theory, attributes this to Foucault. "You have to offer a viable, spectacular third option somewhere between things remaining the same and violent change. Look at Y2K. Everyone was hoping something would change, but it didn't."

Palahniuk, who lives in Portland, Ore., grew up in a trailer in the Southern California desert, where train derailments were the only excitement. His mother worked in a nuclear power plant. His father was murdered three years ago.

"Writing is my chief coping mechanism," he says. "In a way, I'm just killing time, trying to distract myself. I like writing active stuff and anger is such an active emotion. Without it, there's depression. We have a real inability in this society to live side by side with our anger. That's why it explodes in places like Columbine. We need bursts of chaos. We need to be able to hurt each other in a consensual way."

Palahniuk discusses his theories on society's ills over a plate of lettuce at a Westside restaurant. The restaurant is quiet. An old woman eats alone. A clock ticks. On the hour, a little band comes out and plays a show tune. Palahniuk is wearing khakis and a short- sleeved shirt tucked in. He sits so upright and attentive that one is instantly aware of one's own bad posture.

"I was flying to Great Britain recently, and the guy behind the ticket counter at the airport was in a terrible mood. It turns out his back was killing him. I offered him a Vicodin, and he just beamed at me. 'Are you a doctor?' he said. 'No,' I said. 'I'm a writer.' "

Palahniuk adheres to the principles of minimalism, as outlined by writer and writing teacher Gordon Lish. Don't use adverbs. A reader should feel the writing physically. And it only takes one idea to drive a book. You use the same set of horses or ideas to get your characters from Michigan to Oregon and back again.

Which horses does Palahniuk use? "You mean what is my personal investment? We all think if we can just get away from the nest, we'll be OK. Then we find ourselves longing for community. By the end of my books, the main character has found community. The rest is just hamburger."

[Illustration]
Caption: PHOTO: Chuck Palahniuk, 40, wrote "Fight Club," which was made into a movie. His current novel has garnered good reviews.; PHOTOGRAPHER: LORI SHEPLER / Los Angeles Times; PHOTO: "Without [anger], there's depression," Chuck Palahniuk says.; PHOTOGRAPHER: LORI SHEPLER / Los Angeles Times

Credit: TIMES STAFF WRITER

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ProQuest

Databases selected: Multiple databases...

BOOKS TO GO; Oddly Portland and cleanly France; Guides offer a stranger Oregon, an artful New York and a sudsy past.; [HOME EDITION]

Christopher Reynolds. **Los Angeles Times**. Los Angeles, Calif.: Aug 10, 2003. pg. L.9

Abstract (Summary)

Mr. [Chuck Palahniuk], you'll lose the queasy long before Page 92 -- if not on Page 16, where the author's tonsils appear in the jar of formaldehyde, then on Page 41, where a certain adults-only ritual among devotees of "The Rocky Horror Picture Show" is described, or Page 56, where a demure mother does something bad with a sharp object to a man in a hospital. And after Page 92 -- don't get me started.

Palahniuk has written a truly unpredictable travel book, one that not only reveals a deep, if twisted, affection for and knowledge of his hometown, but also features local recipes (plausible and tempting) and includes several lists of attractions (with phone numbers) that suggest conscientious research but don't quite degenerate into guidebook -speak. (Would Arthur Frommer recommend the asphalt basketball court on the dormant crater of Portland's Mt. Tabor? Or the annual Emily Dickinson singalong at the city's Cafe Lena?) One must concede, as is cleverly noted in the publisher's about-the-author note, that "Portland, Oregon, lives in Chuck Palahniuk."

Like many of the writers commissioned for the ongoing Crown Journeys series of "walks" in authors' chosen locales, Palahniuk is principally a novelist. He's 40-ish and has published five novels, including "Fight Club," which was made into a movie starring Edward Norton and Brad Pitt. Palahniuk favors forthright, jarring language, likes to shock and does not soon tire. But that doesn't mean he can't paint a picture or turn a phrase.

Full Text (882 words)

Fugitives and Refugees Fugitives and Refugees

A Walk in Portland, Oregon

Chuck Palahniuk

Crown Journeys: 176 pp., $16

*

Here is a man who savors the sublime, the profane and the ridiculous. And the most ridiculous thing of all in this book may be the author's warning to readers on Page 92 that a visit to the world's largest hairball (one of the many offbeat Oregon attractions detailed here) is "not for the queasy."

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"The trouble with the fringe is, it does tend to unravel," he observes early, and then again later.

"It used to be easy when friends or family came to visit Portland," he writes. "First, you took them to the Van Calvin Mannequin Museum. There they saw hundreds of dusty mannequins, arranged in a nightmare setting in a sweltering hot warehouse. My favorite was the room where seventy battered, naked children sat watching black-and-white cartoons on a huge console television.

"Then you visited the 24 Hour Church of Elvis, where tourists were married and publicly humiliated by the minister. Then the Western Bigfoot Society. Then the UFO Museum. Then maybe you went to see the strippers at the old Carriage Room."

Some of his information may be unhelpful if you're not curious about derelict buildings, elephants or transvestites. And there's no point in reading this book if you don't wonder what sort of youth subculture might live in a city best known for being green and wet.

But where is it written that all travel literature should be written with a wholesome, age-35-to-95 demographic in mind? This is a resolutely 18-to-35 sort of book, possibly even an 18-to-25 sort of book. If the world is ready for "Captain Underpants" books to win over a generation of 10-year-olds (and it has), this may be just the travel lit those readers will want in their collegiate years.

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Museums and Galleries of New York CityMuseums and Galleries of New York City

Insight Guides: 224 pp., $17.95 paper

*

Smaller museums get some ink

From the start, this volume's team of writers owns up to the daunting challenge ahead: Beyond the big five -- Metropolitan, Museum of Modern Art, Guggenheim, Whitney, Natural History -- greater New York teems with more than 70 other notable museums. The book begins with some quick art and regional history and a few maps, then on Page 55 charges into museum-by-museum rundowns.

Amid scores of color photos, the Met gets 10 pages; the Montclair Art Museum, four paragraphs. The book might be a bit bulky to carry around, and with just three pages of text, its "galleries" chapter doesn't really deserve to be advertised on the cover in big letters. But as a resource to be consulted in the hotel before a day's meandering, it looks like a good bet.

*

LavoirsLavoirs

Washhouses of Rural France

Mireille Roddier

Princeton Architectural Press:

88 pp., $24.95 paper

*

More than dirty clothes and suds

From the same press that has brought us thoughtful, understated volumes devoted to serial imagery of grain elevators and New York subway stations, here are scores of evocative black-and-white photos from the long-idle laundering houses of the French countryside.

The pictures are prettier than you might expect -- plenty of handsome stone walls, graceful arches and reflective water -- and the scenes, peopled only by the occasional child at play, do illuminate the rustic ways of the 18th and 19th centuries and the nobility of well-executed vernacular architecture. The text gives laundering history and social context, and the design is elegant. For those who can't get enough of French culture, and their numbers are not small, bienvenue, Francophiles.

Books to Go appears twice a month.

[Illustration]
Caption: PHOTO: AFTER THE BUBBLES BURST: An idle laundering house evokes an earlier way of life in France, from "Lavoirs."; PHOTOGRAPHER: Princeton Architectural Press

Credit: Times Staff Writer

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Databases selected: Multiple databases...

STYLE & CULTURE; BOOK REVIEW; Along for the wild ride with a freewheeling artist; Diary: A Novel; Chuck Palahniuk; Doubleday: 262 pp., $24.95; [HOME EDITION]

Kai Maristed. **Los Angeles Times**. Los Angeles, Calif.: Sep 10, 2003. pg. E.8

Abstract (Summary)

Just what sort of game is underway here? Why, as the mossy fortunes dwindle and the blueblood islanders slave for summer people in the Waytansea Hotel, does the church congregation whisper prayers that [Misty Marie Wilmot], who long ago hung up her sable brushes, return to her vocation? What is the meaning of the messages she finds penciled in library books or scratched into window sills, cryptic warnings from two female painters of earlier generations: "Leave this island before you can't"? For all the grotesquerie of Misty's thickening predicament, in which her physical and mental sufferings accelerate and accumulate, there is something lighthearted in the execution. Characterization is sketchy. (What is it about trailer parks that are supposed to automatically produce American heroes?) The complex plot skates on the edge of our disbelief, touching down into plausible cause and effect before soaring into the supernatural. Beneath the gore and pyrotechnics and satire on old blood versus new money, [CHUCK Palahniuk] is trying to sift out the connection between misery and inspiration, suffering and access to the collective subconscious, and in the process an amazing range of grist gets swept into his mill: Carl Jung, Jainism, the Essenes, the lethal potential of pigments, masochism and a startling phenomenon called the Stendhal Effect -- all interesting in themselves and all contributing clues to Misty's fate.

Full Text (720 words)

CHUCK Palahniuk's fifth novel, "Diary," is at once madly inventive and shamelessly derivative, instructive and infuriating, serious and cartoonish, tender and sadistic. It simply, exuberantly, escapes literary categorization. Think Stephen King meets Robert Coover meets Jonathan Swift; that's how a desperate Hollywood pitchman might try to convey the book's mix of flavors to a mogul producer -- a description unlikely to result in a deal.

Palahniuk's legion of die-hard fans needs no pitch for this new tale by the author of "Fight Club," which became a 1999 movie. This book could be as well, because this purported diary of "Misty Wilmot, the greatest artist throughout history" is all about the visual: the twinned natures of insight and illusion; and, intrinsic to the convoluted plot, the nitty-gritty of painting.

Misty Marie Wilmot, nee Kleinman, was minimally raised by a hippie single mom who worked two grunt jobs while spouting anti- capitalist jeremiads: " 'Scratch any fortune ... and you'll find blood only a generation or two back.' Saying this was supposed to make their trailer lifestyle better." For Misty, who refers to herself in the third person, the only thing that sweetened blue- collar life was painting -- coloring in her imaginary escape world, that is. "Her fantasy village ... the sugary dreams of the poor lonely kid she'd be for the rest of her life. Her pathetic, pretty rhinestone soul." Yes, our diarist, who flees from rags to riches by marrying a rich albeit shiftless fellow art school student, does have issues with self-esteem. But this doesn't hinder her expression of disgust and derision for most everyone she meets. Her husband-to- be: "The only difference between Peter and a homeless mental outpatient with limited access to soap was his jewelry." The denizens of idyllic Waytansea Island: "Whenever one of the local sea turtles comes in clutching her pearls at her withered throat ... then you need to take two drinks." The summer tourists who invade and pollute: "their long hooked fingernails the color of Jordan almonds." Her mother-in-law: "Her chin is tucked down so hard her neck is squashed into folds from ear to ear."

And when Peter is reduced by bungled suicide to a hospital- warehoused vegetable on the mainland, she writes in her diary: "With your kind of coma victims, all the muscles contract. The tendons clench in tighter and tighter." The only one to escape the jaundice tinge of her eye is her 13-year-old daughter, Tabitha. "Her dark hair tied back with a yellow ribbon, she's the perfect Waytansea Island child. All pink lipstick and nail polish. Playing some lovely and old-fashioned game."

But just what sort of game is underway here? Why, as the mossy fortunes dwindle and the blueblood islanders slave for summer people in the Waytansea Hotel, does the church congregation whisper prayers that Misty, who long ago hung up her sable brushes, return to her vocation? What is the meaning of the messages she finds penciled in library books or scratched into window sills, cryptic warnings from two female painters of earlier generations: "Leave this island before you can't"? For all the grotesquerie of Misty's thickening predicament, in which her physical and mental sufferings accelerate and accumulate, there is something lighthearted in the execution. Characterization is sketchy. (What is it about trailer parks that are supposed to automatically produce American heroes?) The complex plot skates on the edge of our disbelief, touching down into plausible cause and effect before soaring into the supernatural. Beneath the gore and pyrotechnics and satire on old blood versus new money, Palahniuk is trying to sift out the connection between misery and inspiration, suffering and access to the collective subconscious, and in the process an amazing range of grist gets swept into his mill: Carl Jung, Jainism, the Essenes, the lethal potential of pigments, masochism and a startling phenomenon called the Stendhal Effect -- all interesting in themselves and all contributing clues to Misty's fate. Can he possibly deliver himself, and Misty Marie, from the snares of the questions he's left open? The pages seem to turn themselves faster and faster, right to the very last -- and maybe that's the answer.

[Illustration]
Caption: PHOTO: HARD TO LABEL: Chuck Palahniuk is also the author of the novel "Fight Club."; PHOTOGRAPHER: Associated Press

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THE LITERARY LIFE; That queasy feeling; [HOME EDITION]

Michael T. Jarvis. **Los Angeles Times**. Los Angeles, Calif.: Sep 28, 2003. pg. E.3

Abstract (Summary)

Chuck Palahniuk is a writer whose work elicits a passionate response. The author of "Fight Club" and the recently released "Diary" trades in harsher, less varnished truths, and his fans are known for their devotion. (When Random House decided to promote "Diary" with "street teams" that would advertise his work with fliers, stunts and word of mouth, the book's Web site was swarmed with volunteers.)

That's a bit of an understatement. At Columbia University, a listener had convulsions and threw up, Palahniuk says. "It scared me. The official from Random House asked me to stop, but I wanted to leave it up to the crowd." When the audience voted to continue, Palahniuk obliged and no injuries ensued.

Full Text (395 words)

Chuck Palahniuk is a writer whose work elicits a passionate response. The author of "Fight Club" and the recently released "Diary" trades in harsher, less varnished truths, and his fans are known for their devotion. (When Random House decided to promote "Diary" with "street teams" that would advertise his work with fliers, stunts and word of mouth, the book's Web site was swarmed with volunteers.)

Still, it was a bit of a shock when the fan base began to swoon, literally, at Palahniuk's readings. "So far 25 people have passed out and two have gone to the hospital," he says. "It's happened in every city, at every stop on the book tour," which included a recent L.A. stop.

The cause of the visceral reaction? It's an unpublished work called "Guts," which Palahniuk describes as "three true masturbation stories gone wrong," welded together into a three-act story. "The first two-thirds are hilarious. People just roar, they're so pulled into it. They are embarrassing and humiliating and funny stories. The story almost kills me. It's tough for me to read. It's ultimately a really upsetting story."

That's a bit of an understatement. At Columbia University, a listener had convulsions and threw up, Palahniuk says. "It scared me. The official from Random House asked me to stop, but I wanted to leave it up to the crowd." When the audience voted to continue, Palahniuk obliged and no injuries ensued.

The writer, whose legion of cult followers swelled after "Fight Club" became a film, insists the reaction isn't a sick joke. "I think people are hyperventilating a little bit," he says. "It's like in cults, they make you chant, and in fundamentalist religions, they make you sing. It has the same effect. When the plot twist happens in the last third of the story, people are physiologically set up for passing out."

Palahniuk appreciates "seeing what a story could do," but was unnerved when one man screamed while unconscious. "It's a compliment," he says, "but I don't want to see people in pain and paying for medical bills."

Curious? You can read "Guts" in next February's edition of Playboy. The magazine's fiction editor bought the story after hearing it at a New York reading during which two people fainted.

-- Michael T. Jarvis

[Illustration]
Caption: PHOTO: 'GUTS' AND GLORY: Writer Chuck Palahniuk.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Lori Shepler Los Angeles Times

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The Best Books of 2003; [HOME EDITION]

Fiction and Poetry. **Los Angeles Times**. Los Angeles, Calif.: Dec 7, 2003. pg. R.3

Abstract (Summary)

On the scene but not a literary personality, writing with passionate intelligence and richly metaphorical style, [James Wood] has ignored the opaque aridity of literary theory and insisted on the human relevance of classic and modern literature. Wood set forth his aesthetic and religious principles in his first book, "The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief" (1999). The big gun in Wood's critical armory is theology. The autobiographical sections of "The Broken Estate" set out ideas he develops in his novel. He asserts that our religious belief was broken in the mid-19th century, when "the supposition that religion was a set of divine truth-claims, and that the Gospel narratives were supernatural reports" began to collapse; when "historical biblical criticism began to treat the Bible as if it were a biography or even a novel." A key argument in both his criticism and his novel is that there is no correspondence between religion and morality, that "God-fearing Europe ... does not seem to have been obviously more moral than God- questioning Europe" after Voltaire and Hume. The hero of Wood's novel, who thinks the Bible is merely a collection of myths and that religion does not improve human behavior, wrestles with the consequences of abandoning religious belief. The witty, serious and intelligent "The Book Against God," its theological meaning cradled in the arguments of "The Broken Estate," matches Wood's high critical standards.

"Our Lady of the Forest" is another virtuoso performance from [David Guterson], whose first novel, "Snow Falling on Cedars," won the 1994 PEN/Faulkner Award. His gripping, darkly comic new novel marks an expansion of his vision, a deepening exploration of the richly layered realm of the Pacific Northwest that Guterson has come to own as surely as William Faulkner did his Yoknapatawpha County. Like Faulkner and the magnificent August Wilson, whose cycle of plays chronicles the African American community in Pittsburgh, Guterson sings the song of place with perfect pitch. In "Our Lady of the Forest," Guterson leads us into the still grandeur of the rain- drenched forest of northwest Washington, then unflinchingly dares us to examine the mysteries of faith and redemption. His uncanny sense of place is at work from the opening paragraph. His transporting novel balances on the tension between belief and despair without ever losing its sense of mystery.

Who knows if [Barry Unsworth] had the United States and Iraq in mind when he wrote his latest novel, "The Songs of the Kings," but this retelling of the story of Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia -- a story first told in Homer's "The Iliad" and elaborated in dramas by Aeschylus, Euripides, Sophocles, Racine and Goethe -- is meant to strike a disturbingly modern note. "The Songs of the Kings" is a smaller book than Unsworth's monumental and heartbreaking novel of the 18th century slave trade, "Sacred Hunger," which won the Booker Prize in 1992. It's less suspenseful, because we know the outcome. Its characters, though vivid, are further removed from us. But it shares with "Sacred Hunger" an immensely sophisticated grasp of politics, economics and psychology, of how the world works. Then and now, the innocent and the honestly uncertain rarely prevail against people who push a simple, brutal idea relentlessly, much less against those who can dress up that idea in fine-sounding words.

Full Text (12293 words)

All Day Permanent Red: The First Battle Scenes of ; Homer's "Iliad"; Christopher Logue; Farrar, Straus & Giroux: 54 pp., $18

War Music: An Account of Books 1 to 4 and 16 to 19 of Homer's "Iliad"; Christopher Logue; University of Chicago Press: 240 pp., $16

The literature of war begins with literature itself, with "The Iliad." Homer's epic about the Greek siege of Troy, composed perhaps 2,800 years ago, still stands unexcelled as an expression of the devastating power of war, the tragedy it begets and the emotions it unleashes -- its glamour as well as its horror. Although "The Odyssey," the other epic poem by Homer, has a sexier storyline and more sensational supernatural effects, among connoisseurs of classical poetry "The Iliad" retains a position of unassailable paramountcy, for its greater antiquity and its

profound insights into the human condition. No work of art has ever done a better job of explaining why men go to war, and it does so not with explanations but by a succession of compelling, unforgettable images. The challenge of rendering "The Iliad" into a modern idiom remains the same now as it was 400 years ago, when George Chapman produced the first English version: how to express those images in a way that speaks to the contemporary reader directly, as the Greek text did.

Christopher Logue's "Iliad" began life in 1959 as an assignment to work on a radio script for the BBC. He had never studied Greek, so he worked entirely from translations, ranging from Chapman's to E.V. Rieu's sturdy prose version, published in 1950 (but surprisingly, it seems, without consulting Richmond Lattimore's widely praised rendering). His work on the project was desultory; the first volume, "War Music," didn't appear until 1984. Three more volumes have followed: "Kings" (1991), "The Husbands" (1994) and now "All Day Permanent Red." (Although Logue has never, as far as I know, stated an intention to create a full version of "The Iliad" -- and having covered less than half of it thus far, the 77-year-old poet probably won't do so unless he picks up the pace significantly - - he has produced a considerable body of verse.)

The result is, above all, brilliantly original, consummately crafted English verse, dominated but by no means constrained by iambic pentameter and, secondarily, fabulous Homer. The cumulative effect is to bring the ethos of Homer to life for English speakers with a vigor and immediacy that surpass every available modern translation. Logue's Homer satisfies the first requirement of a classic: It is a work completely unlike any that came before it. It solves one of the thorniest problems of translation, faithfulness to the original, simply by ignoring it -- by being not a translation but rather an imaginative re-creation. Logue, with unfaltering confidence, sets his own poetic vision supreme and treats the original text as a continuously flowing river of source material, parallel but subordinate. The Greeks had a word for it: hubris. The result is flawed, and sometimes ugly, but it is poetry that shines with greatness.

-- Jamie James

*

American Woman, A Novel; Susan Choi; HarperCollins: 370 pp., $24.95

Politics beckons the artist. The world's vexed histories have a ready-made appeal for readers -- rooting interests, partisan interests, plenty of chances to satisfy the lust for moral outrage. And without our help, we think, history isn't good enough. We all need the actors' motives revealed at a level only the imagination can reach. We need to know the fantasies that made reality. Politics, though, can be a fatal attraction for an artist. In a work of literature, Stendhal famously said, politics is "like a pistol shot in the middle of a concert ... loud and vulgar, and yet a thing it is not possible to ignore." Politics, that is to say, can wreck the texture of imaginative work. Susan Choi here bases her novel on the remnants of the Symbionese Liberation Army -- characters guaranteed to arouse partisanship, contempt or moral opprobrium, all of which would ruin the novel's music. But Choi handles that difficulty with an amazing sense of control.

-- Jay Cantor

*

Any Human Heart, A Novel; William Boyd; Alfred A. Knopf: 500 pp., $24.95

William Boyd has, during the last 20-odd years, garnered the kind of recognition most writers only dream of. His first novel, "A Good Man in Africa," won both the Whitbread Book Award and a Somerset Maugham Award. Ignoring the conventional wisdom that after so auspicious a start, the follow-up has to be an anticlimax, a year later he knocked off "An Ice-Cream War," which not only collected the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize but also was short-listed for the Booker. "Brazzaville Beach" picked up the James Tait Black Memorial Prize, while "The Blue Afternoon" won the Sunday Express Book of the Year award in Britain and this paper's Book Prize in fiction.

Boyd has an exceptional ability to tell a really compelling story, in dense, imaginative detail, about characters endowed with complex, and convincing, emotional lives. This is no mean achievement. What Boyd offers us this time is one creative tour de force enshrined inside another: not merely the fictional life of Logan Mountstuart, minor novelist, art fancier, man-about-town and wartime intelligence agent, but this fiction presented as Mountstuart's bona fide journals, complete with lacunae, editorial notes and linking passages, and a remarkably thorough index.

Boyd takes tremendous risks in making this not over-talented, ambitious sensualist draw so full and unflattering a portrait of himself. That he succeeds so triumphantly is chiefly a tribute to the never-failing realism of his historical ghost-raising, the rich and loving detail with which he invests each fresh scene and character, the pitch-perfect ear with which he catches the musings, not only of Logan himself but also of his friends and relatives, at each successive stage of their lives. And for this, as the Grossmith brothers proved with the classic "The Diary of a

Nobody," your protagonist doesn't need to be clever or dominating, let alone nice. What Boyd has created is a seedy, sexually grubby, literary Everyman to carry the shabby banner of the last century's British upper- middle classes. I've already read this book twice and probably shall again. Of how many novels can that be said?

Peter Green

*

The Book Against God, A Novel; James Wood; Farrar, Straus & Giroux: 258 pp., $24

On the scene but not a literary personality, writing with passionate intelligence and richly metaphorical style, James Wood has ignored the opaque aridity of literary theory and insisted on the human relevance of classic and modern literature. Wood set forth his aesthetic and religious principles in his first book, "The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief" (1999). The big gun in Wood's critical armory is theology. The autobiographical sections of "The Broken Estate" set out ideas he develops in his novel. He asserts that our religious belief was broken in the mid-19th century, when "the supposition that religion was a set of divine truth-claims, and that the Gospel narratives were supernatural reports" began to collapse; when "historical biblical criticism began to treat the Bible as if it were a biography or even a novel." A key argument in both his criticism and his novel is that there is no correspondence between religion and morality, that "God-fearing Europe ... does not seem to have been obviously more moral than God- questioning Europe" after Voltaire and Hume. The hero of Wood's novel, who thinks the Bible is merely a collection of myths and that religion does not improve human behavior, wrestles with the consequences of abandoning religious belief. The witty, serious and intelligent "The Book Against God," its theological meaning cradled in the arguments of "The Broken Estate," matches Wood's high critical standards.

-- Jeffrey Meyers

*

Brick Lane, A Novel; Monica Ali; Scribner: 374 pp., $25

Monica Ali takes us into the crooked, narrow streets of Brick Lane, London, a neighborhood crowded with Bengali immigrants, and follows the tight perspective of Nazneen, a Bangladeshi immigrant woman who comes to a slow awakening. "Brick Lane" is an earnest tale of female empowerment with some of the spirit of the popular British film "Bend It Like Beckham," only "Brick Lane," as a novel should be, is better and deeper, with great flair and sensitivity. Though the novel is seemingly narrow in focus, that confinement creates an atmosphere of impacted intelligence and power, the sentences jammed up, idiosyncratic, full of marvelous insight, as if the author has crammed all her novelistic ambition into Nazneen's head.

"Brick Lane" is a tender, traditional immigrant tale wherein strong, silent women prove to be the real backbone of family. This is an old story but a durable one, and fortunately Ali makes it fresher by investing each emotional turning point with Nazneen's own brand of patient compassion. This is fiction that is at once sophisticated and innocent, premodern and postmodern -- and above all, compassionate and entertaining.

Marina Budhos

*

Collected Poems; Robert Lowell; Edited by Frank Bidart and David Gewanter; Farrar, Straus & Giroux: 1,186 pp., $45

Robert Lowell died in 1977, so there has been a rather extraordinary delay -- a quarter of a century -- in publishing his "Collected Poems," remarkable considering that Lowell was nothing less than the most renowned, most lauded, most influential poet of his day, the last to command the public stage, to be featured on the cover of Time and to be called, by one critic, "the greatest poet writing in English." But the delay -- having allowed the melodramatic dust of the life to settle -- has resulted in an edition as unfashionably, ruthlessly serious as the poet himself, one he doubtless would have appreciated. Edited by Frank Bidart and David Gewanter, it features an unusually elaborate scholarly apparatus for a collected work: notes, chronology, bibliography, even a glossary. The magnitude of Lowell's achievement -- an achievement won against horrific odds -- can now come fully and magnificently into view. "We only live between / before we are and what we were," Lowell once wrote, but his work in this "Collected Poems" stands secure, timeless, outside the relatively brief span that was his bedeviled life.

-- Caroline Fraser

*

The Complete Poems of Kenneth Rexroth; Edited by Sam Hamill and Bradford Morrow; Copper Canyon Press: 768 pp., $40

Kenneth Rexroth worked to establish a West Coast identity for American poetry, one that would reflect the unique geographical, historical, cultural and ethnic qualities of the region. "I am NOT Ivy League," he once asserted, as if anyone could have ever confused his autodidactic libertarian anarchism with Ivy League elitism or New Critical detachment. He was both a populist and an intellectual, a potent combination of cultural values in the right circumstances. Rexroth also understood that regional literary identity need not, indeed must not, be provincial. His international sense of literary enterprise led him to translate from the Chinese, Japanese, French, Spanish and Greek, all relevant sources for a California literary identity.

Rexroth's place in the American literary canon, like that of many other California poets, such as Robinson Jeffers, William Everson, Josephine Miles, Yvor Winters, Robert Duncan and Jack Spicer, remains open to critical debate. Consistently ignored or underrated by the Eastern literary establishment, these poets continue to exercise an active influence on West Coast writers, and they continue to be read, though largely outside the academy. Amid his huge body of published work, Rexroth left a small but enduring body of original poems, elegant translations and potent essays. He may not be quite a major poet, but he remains a significant and important one, and his combined achievements as poet, critic and translator make him one of the chief American poet-critics of his age. Scholars and critics who endeavor to discuss mid-20th century American poetry responsibly ignore him at their peril.

-- Dana Gioia

*

Deep Purple, A Novel; Mayra Montero; Translated from the Spanish by Edith Grossman; The Ecco Press: 182 pp., $22.95

Does a solo violinist make love differently than a clarinetist or a cellist? Ask classical music critic Agustin Caban, the protagonist of "Deep Purple," Mayra Montero's viscerally erotic novel, and he would tell you they perform worlds apart in the bedroom. "[I]f she's a clarinetist, you have to be careful, very careful of her lips." Regarding a virtuosa violinist, Agustin observes that "there is no more noble service to fine music, no more imperishable support one can offer a soloist, than to throw her facedown on a bed. There they finally explode.... Cellists howl more than the others. And almost all of them tend to be wildly passionate, or too demanding."

Montero may be one of the most under-recognized Latin American writers of our time. In "Deep Purple," as in "The Last Night I Spent with You," she explores primitive worlds, re-imagining them as sexual energy in the insular world of classical musicians. Buried in its pages are the mysteries of human desire; what some may see as a one-note novel is a dizzying work of art.

-- Adriana Lopez

*

Diary, A Novel; Chuck Palahniuk; Doubleday: 262 pp., $24.95

Chuck Palahniuk's fifth novel, "Diary," is at once madly inventive and shamelessly derivative, instructive and infuriating, serious and cartoonish, tender and sadistic. It simply, exuberantly escapes literary categorization. Think Stephen King meets Robert Coover meets Jonathan Swift; that's how a desperate Hollywood pitchman might try to convey the book's mix of flavors to a mogul producer -- a description unlikely to result in a deal.

Palahniuk's legion of die-hard fans needs no pitch for this new tale by the author of "Fight Club," which became a 1999 movie. This book could be as well, because this purported diary of "Misty Wilmot, the greatest artist throughout history" is all about the visual: the twinned natures of insight and illusion; and, intrinsic to the convoluted plot, the nitty-gritty of painting.

The complex plot skates on the edge of our disbelief, touching down into plausible cause and effect before soaring into the supernatural. Beneath the gore and pyrotechnics and satire on old blood versus new money, Palahniuk is trying to sift out the connection between misery and inspiration, suffering and access to the collective subconscious, and in the process an amazing range of grist gets swept into his mill: Carl Jung, Jainism, the Essenes, the lethal potential of pigments, masochism and a startling phenomenon called the Stendhal Effect.

-- Bernadette Murphy

*

Disaffections: Complete Poems, 1930-1950; Cesare Pavese; Translated from the Italian by Geoffrey Brock; Copper Canyon Press: 380 pp., $17 paper

When Cesare Pavese started publishing in the early 1930s, Italian fascism was at its height. Everything about fascism, not least of all its nationalism, was repugnant to Pavese, who was arrested for subversive activities and sent for three years to a remote town in southern Italy. During his time in the south, which was commuted to eight months, Pavese finished his first book: his sequence of narrative poems, "Lavorare stanca" (literally "working tired," but translated for "Disaffections" as "Work's Tiring"), one of the most singular collections of Italian poetry in the 20th century. Pavese went on to become a celebrated novelist, writing relatively little poetry between 1940 and 1950, when he committed suicide at age 42.

Until now, Pavese's poetry hasn't been available in an English translation that carries both the colloquialness of his language and the haunting rhythms of his verse. Geoffrey Brock's fine new translation has met this need so that, also given the recent reissue of several of Pavese's novels, American readers can have the pleasure of getting to know him in some depth. Brock's translations are faithful to Pavese's tone, even as they usually stay close to the literal meaning. It is an impressive achievement.

-- Andrew Frisardi

*

Do Everything in the Dark, A Novel; Gary Indiana; St. Martin's: 276 pp., $23.95

"Do Everything in the Dark" is set in New York, but it is basically a backdrop for a group portrait. There's no conventional "atmosphere." A single sentence is enough to establish the setting: "Sleepwalkers armed with credit cards spilled along the sidewalks, filling outdoor tables of fifth-rate pizzerias and bistros -- the East Village's Kmart parody of Montmartre." And the collective mood is evoked by a list of everything that no longer excites the group, from drugs to hip-hop, sex to meditation, Rolfing to "ever-refined electronic gadgets that seemed to promise some control over the gathering chaos."

As in his earlier novel "Resentment," the lives of Gary Indiana's leading characters are cunningly interwoven, but especially in "Do Everything in the Dark," which is written partly in the omniscient third person and partly in the first, Indiana himself the narrator. "People tell me things," he explains. "I listen. I watch and wait." In a tour de force of storytelling, he creates the effect of being invisibly present at every scene, a self-acknowledged member of a social microcosm "getting older in an age when everybody had seen too much by the time they were thirty-five."

-- Gavin Lambert

*

Drop City, A Novel, T.C. Boyle; Viking: 444 pp., $25.95

Who would have thought that T.C. Boyle would write a defining novel about the hippie side of the 1960s? Yet in "Drop City," Boyle has written a vastly entertaining tale that balances the exuberance and the excesses, the promise and the preposterousness of the counterculture perhaps better than any other work of American fiction. It's not a satire, though it's often very funny; not a mere exercise in nostalgia, though every detail shines with what seems to be Boyle's total recall. It's realistic.T.C. Boyle a realist? He has done many things in fiction, antic and outrageous things; his career trajectory, from "East Is East" through "The Road to Wellville," "The Tortilla Curtain," "Riven Rock" and "A Friend of the Earth," resembles the multiple, fizzing arcs of fireworks. But here he arrives at something solid. Not just because of the details -- though after reading "Drop City," we almost feel we could build a log-and-sod hut, cook moose stew or camp out in the snow at 40 below ourselves -- not just because Boyle, instead of circling above his characters as before, comes down among them and sees their genuineness as clearly as their pretensions; but because we can finish this book and think: Yes, that's probably how it really was.

-- Michael Harris

*

Dumb Luck, A Novel; Vu Trong Phung; Translated from the Vietnamese by Peter Zinoman and Nguyen Nguyet Cam; University of Michigan Press: 190 pp., $19.95

The Western world knows little of the fine tradition of Vietnamese literature, although a few works have made their way abroad in recent years since Vietnam's doi moi reforms and the encouraging of fuller cultural expression. Now, for the first time, a novel by Vu Trong Phung, a brilliant and prolific satirist who has been compared to Balzac and lauded as arguably the greatest Vietnamese writer of this rich literary period, has been published in English.

Banned by the North Vietnamese authorities until 1986, his works later became required reading in schools and are now as integral to Vietnam's educational system as "The Catcher in the Rye" or "The Grapes of Wrath" are to our own.

Before dying in 1939 of the combined effects of tuberculosis and opium addiction one week shy of his 27th birthday, Phung had written eight novels, seven plays, several dozen short stories, five book- length works of nonfiction reportage and hundreds of reviews, essays and articles. His best-known work, "Dumb Luck," which first appeared in serialized form in a Hanoi newspaper in 1936, has now been translated into English by a husband and wife team of academics from UC Berkeley, Peter Zinoman and Nguyen Nguyet Cam.

"Dumb Luck" centers on a street-smart urban trickster named Red- Haired Xuan. He is a clever Candide who, far from dodging misfortune after misfortune, bumbles through life's amusing adventures to find that, in fact, every seeming adversity does indeed result in the best of all possible worlds -- for him, at least, while everyone else is none the wiser. The setting is Vietnam in the 1930s, when the country was undergoing enormous social change. The pressures for modernization, for Vietnam's elite to adopt French language, fashion and cultural mores were enormous.

Phung's translators offer a 24-page introduction of meticulously footnoted narrative analysis that painstakingly places the work in context, but it is best read and fully appreciated after reading Phung's fine, funny and still relevant work.

-- Sheridan Prasso

*

Evidence of Things Unseen, A Novel; Marianne Wiggins; Simon & Schuster: 386 pp., $25

Marianne Wiggins is not afraid to announce sky-high ambitions in her bold, breathtaking new novel. The author takes as her epigraph a section about plutonium from John McPhee's cautionary 1974 portrait of a nuclear physicist, "The Curve of Binding Energy," then opens her own narrative with a bravura description of the Trinity Atomic Test Site in New Mexico, where the first atomic bomb was exploded: "Somewhere in the heart of North America there is a desert where the heat of several suns has fused the particles of sand into a single sheet of glass so dazzling it sends a constant signal to the moon." Subsequent chapters begin with quotations from "Moby-Dick," and even as she emulates Melville, enlacing flights of scientific, political, social and philosophical speculation within a stirring human drama, Wiggins' voice remains triumphantly her own. "Evidence of Things Unseen" becomes a love story lit up by the heavens.

With this poignant, realistic portrait of two people who love one another deeply but not equally, Wiggins may have tapped a vein of common humanity that will bring "Evidence of Things Unseen" a wider audience than her earlier work. Such novels as "Eveless Eden" (1995) and "Almost Heaven" (1998) were as ambitious as "Evidence of Things Unseen"; "John Dollar" (1989) was very nearly as accomplished. But it was hard with these books to get beyond Wiggins' savage depictions of human nature and society. By softening the bite of her writing, Wiggins has created a story as compelling as it is devastating.

-- Wendy Smith

*

The Fortress of Solitude, A Novel; Jonathan Lethem; Doubleday: 470 pp., $26

"Let's pretend that I want to write a novel concerning the people or some of the people with whom I grew up," James Baldwin, a native son of Harlem, once proposed in a talk called "Notes for a Hypothetical Novel." What would this novel be like? For one thing, "the social realities with which these people ... were contending can't be left out of the novel without falsifying their experience. And -- this is very important -- this all has something to do with the sight of that tormented, falling down, drunken, bleeding man I mentioned at the beginning. Who is he and what does he mean?"

In his sixth novel, Jonathan Lethem has written a book uncannily to the specifications of Baldwin's grand hypothesis. In "The Fortress of Solitude," Lethem's narrator is a rare white kid in a black and Puerto Rican neighborhood, the son of a fanatically solitary abstract painter and a flaky, pot-smoking mom in 1970s Brooklyn. He's a boy in just about the same role of odd man out that Baldwin described more than 40 years ago: "I only knew Negroes except for one Jewish boy, the only white boy in an all-Negro elementary school." As for that tormented, bleeding, falling down man, here his name is Aaron X. Doily, a homeless drunk whom Dylan Ebdus, the white kid, sees dropping from the sky one day.

Doily may be a human wreck, but he is also something of a comic- book superhero: the possessor of a magic ring that enables him, however poorly, to fly. Expiring in a hospital, he passes the ring and its powers along to Dylan, who shares his new capacities with his best friend, Mingus Rude. Dylan and Mingus are close friends into adolescence. They come together over an identical taste in comics, and as they grow up and culturally move on, they make a silent deal of unconditional acceptance: "What was new in the other you pretended to take for granted, a bargain instinctively struck to ensure your own coping on the other end." It would be a mistake not calling this love, and the boys handle their supernatural powers in much the same way as their love -- as something awkward, astonishing, fitful and private.

Can white men talk? "The Fortress of Solitude" is a funny and very sad book, exceptionally well made and keenly observed. It is what lots of contemporary novels mean to be and few are: both intimate and vast, giving us social and private realities without seeming to falsify either. Lethem has done something remarkable.

-- Benjamin Kunkel

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Four Spirits, A Novel; Sena Jeter Naslund; William Morrow: 544 pp., $26.95

Forty years ago, four young girls were killed when a bomb exploded at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala. As Sena Jeter Naslund reminds us in one of several deftly inserted passages of historical exposition in her fervent new novel, 16th Street was African American Birmingham's wealthiest congregation, cool to the fiery activism of Bethel Baptist minister Fred Shuttlesworth and only slightly more receptive to the less confrontational stance of out-of-towner Martin Luther King Jr. "Their class of colored wanted to negotiate," thinks Gloria Callahan, a fictional 16th Street parishioner who has tentatively joined the civil rights movement. Mocking that class' hesitant entry into the fray, Gloria's combative friend Christine Taylor sneers: "Now educated, rich Negroes talking to rich white folks." But moderates and militants alike were all "niggers" to the white men who set the bomb, and murder was their chosen way of backing up Alabama Gov. George C. Wallace's vow to preserve segregation today, segregation tomorrow and segregation forever.

The bombing and other brutal real-life events form a backdrop against which Naslund's large cast of characters confronts ethical, political and even romantic dilemmas in the city that came to symbolize white intransigence. Herself a Birmingham native, a college student there during the most intense years of the struggle for racial justice, Naslund recaptures that period with immediacy and intimacy. She has written a stirring popular novel that vividly conveys the everyday texture and moral significance of a movement that permanently changed American society.

-- Wendy Smith

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The Furies, A Novel, Fernanda Eberstadt; Alfred A. Knopf: 452 pp., $26

The flinty topography of contemporary marriage is the terrain mapped by Fernanda Eberstadt ("When the Sons of Heaven Meet the Daughters of the Earth") in her newest novel, "The Furies," a cautionary tale for those who would live in wedded bliss. Reminiscent of classical mythology in the author's use of archetypal themes, the narrative is also up to the minute in its exploration of the difficulties plaguing modern marriage.

Eberstadt's writing is up to the epic task she sets herself. Her descriptions of new parenthood are incisive, capturing both the awe and the exhaustion an infant brings, along with the wedge it can interpose in even the closest relationship.

Though their romance is not as Olympian for readers as it is for the lovers, the couple's dissolution is devastating. Eberstadt limns crisply, achingly, the slow erosion of their marriage, the little sharp-tongued comments that build until the "result is a bloodless scoreboarding: does she get along with your friends, how good's the sex, does he talk about his feelings. Sexuality being something that's not in every glance, every smile ... every FIGHT, but another multilateral treaty -- I'll [have sex] if you do the dishes -- another improving activity, another thing to 'work on.' "

In myth, there are hideous creatures to slay. In Eberstadt's novel, the creatures are within us. We carry the germ of our own ruin -- and the ruin of the person we love. We must not provoke these creatures, her tale reminds us, for they wreak immense damage: "[W]hen you've broken a horse, you've got a ride, but break your lover, and all that's left is your own arid will, a bed turned to rocky soil that will never take the plough."

As tragic as any classic myth, and haunting in its brutality, "The Furies" is an intelligent if disheartening look into the forces at work inside marriage.

Bernadette Murphy

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Genesis

A Novel

Jim Crace

Farrar, Straus & Giroux: 246 pp., $23

There are writers -- though not many -- who permanently alter the way you view even the most quotidian subject. Anyone who's read Nicholson Baker's "The Mezzanine" will never again regard a shoelace as just a bit of string. Similarly, anyone who's read Jim Crace's "Being Dead," winner of the 2000 National Book Critics Circle award, will no longer think of a corpse as just a body that has ceased to breathe. And after reading Crace's latest, "Genesis," chances are your conception of conception will also mutate. Jim Crace is one of the most stunningly original novelists writing today. In "Genesis," Crace shifts his biological focus from the end of human life to its very beginning. This time, his subject is the nexus of love, sex and biology, as they contribute to this most unpredictable and contradictory occurrence, at once so fleeting and yet having such lasting consequences. He dazzles readers with a fresh, wry slant on something that happens anywhere and everywhere, eon after eon: new life.

-- Heller McAlpin

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Good Faith

A Novel

Jane Smiley

Alfred A. Knopf: 424 pp., $26

Only a writer of consummate craftsmanship and scope could write a novel about a series of real estate deals in a small town an hour and a half from New York City and make it so fully satisfying as to be thrilling. Jane Smiley has done it. She has tackled the shift in our country's attitude toward money during the dawn of the Ronald Reagan era: that moment in American history when suddenly it seemed there was free money to be had, thanks to changes in the tax code; when deal-making took on a brand-new sophistication; and when the conflict between developing and preserving land reached a turning point. Smiley's range is broad, her technique masterful as she explores the forces that upset the balance in love, in work, in a country's economy, in a region's ecology. The light note upon which "Good Faith" ends keeps it within the framework of the comic, but not without first giving a detailed and devastating look at the greed and corrupt business practices that ultimately brought the savings and loan industry and some of our country's major corporations and accounting firms to their knees. "Good Faith" is a cautionary prequel just right for our times. And great fun, to boot.

-- Jane Ciabattari

*The Great Fire

A Novel

Shirley Hazzard

Farrar, Straus & Giroux: 278 pp., $24

Shirley Hazzard writes for grown-ups. Her long-awaited new book, "The Great Fire," can be counted with "Middlemarch" as one of the few novels in English that can hold the attention of an adult without recourse to comedy, freakish plot turns or sentimentality. It is also a classic romance so cleverly embedded in a work of clear-eyed postwar sagacity that readers will not realize until halfway through that they are rooting for a pair of ill-starred lovers who might have stepped off a Renaissance stage. As readers of "The Transit of Venus" will remember, the greatest pleasure is Hazzard's subtle and unexpected prose. Of a robust military wife, she writes that she had "a piping voice, active with falsity." She describes another character as a man in whom "an intense, original lode of high feeling had been depleted: he was working, now, from a keen memory of authentic emotion." Never lyrical for

the sake of lyricism, Hazzard's prose follows the sensible course of her characters -- open to beauty and alert to its dangers.

-- Regina Marler

*Great Neck

A Novel

Jay Cantor

Alfred A. Knopf: 710 pp., $27.95

"Great Neck" is a big, brilliant, social novel swarming with laments. Jay Cantor's book traverses several decades, opening in 1978, as six childhood friends from Great Neck, Long Island, reunite in a courtroom. One of them, Beth Kaplan, has been accused of setting bombs a decade earlier to protest the U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Now, 10 years later, she seems a casualty of bad timing, the float that arrives long after the parade has passed.

This sense of how history can strand a person is one of Cantor's accomplishments. Here is an encyclopedia of rage: black rage, Irish working-class rage, the rage of youth, of young women, righteous rage, lovers' rage, rage at the past, at futility, at being alive -- as if that too was a punishment -- scary, painful, adolescent, political rage, rage in a wheelchair, genius thwarted, genius squandered. Rage at how quickly things happened and how quickly they were over. Nobody has a happy ending. "There is plenty of hope," Cantor quotes Kafka. "Just not for us."

-- Leslie Brody

*How to Breathe Underwater

Stories

Julie Orringer

Alfred A. Knopf: 228 pp., $21

A little girl, her front tooth coming loose, fidgets in her velvet party dress one particularly hot Thanksgiving in New Orleans. Ella, her parents and her younger brother Benjamin, dressed in his Pilgrim costume, are en route to spend the holiday not, as usual, with relatives, but with strangers: people who eat seaweed and conduct exotic healing rituals. Ella's mother has been undergoing chemotherapy and has also been pursuing spiritual and holistic approaches to treating her cancer. Thanksgiving with these strangers is simply another oddity for the family to cope with. "Shoes off now!" a crayoned sign directs them on arrival, and this is only the mildest of several shocks that Ella will experience in the course of the visit. "Pilgrims," the first of nine short stories in Julie Orringer's arresting debut collection, "How to Breathe Underwater," displays this writer's gift for portraying the world from a child's (or, in other stories, a teenager's) perspective. Many writers have a knack for evoking a child's sensibility. (For aspiring authors, adopting a juvenile viewpoint has practically become a default mode.) But the ability to tell a story -- and keep readers eagerly turning pages -- is less common than might be supposed. Throughout the collection, Orringer's engaging wit, her eye for social detail, her ear for patterns of speech and thought, and her insights into human nature proclaim her a writer to be reckoned with.

-- Merle Rubin

*Hunger

Elise Blackwell

Little, Brown: 134 pp., $16.95

It's a stretch to call this exquisite little book by Elise Blackwell a novel. In fact, it's barely a novella, even though there's something about the momentum of it that makes it much more than a short story that has outgrown its bounds. And then there's the way that Blackwell craftily weaves history and botany through this utterly devourable narrative; it reminds us of those delicious genre crossings -- equally full of fancy and fact, plot and digression -- that the wonderful Italian writer Aldo Buzzi has elevated to a new literary art form. "Hunger" is a compact embarrassment of riches.

-- Mark Rozzo

*If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things

A Novel

Jon McGregor

Mariner Books: 288 pp., $13

Jon McGregor published this novel a year ago in England. Nominated for a Man Booker Prize, it disappeared for a time, only to resurface on our shores. This is fast fiction, as fast as the mind works: sentences unfinished, assumed understandings, cultural references. It's what James Joyce and Virginia Woolf (and others less successful) worked to achieve. Then came the age of irony, of story, of word-processed sentences. But this novel's 26-year-old author captures the feeling of a city, a street, a day, an accident - - and a larger world that couldn't care less, the rest of us in parentheses.

"So listen," he writes. "Listen, and there is more to hear. The rattle of dustbin lid knocked to the floor. The scrawl and scratch of two hackle-raised cats." Listening is what McGregor does best, with his ear to the keyholes of some 25 apartments on one street. But he can also see inside, way inside. He sees the man with burnt hands who failed to save his wife from a fire and now is raising their 4-year-old daughter. He sees the mother of twin boys. He sees the ex-soldier, the pierced teenagers in love and the girl with square glasses who is our narrator. And he sees the young man in No. 18, scribbling on Polaroids of the neighbors, obsessed with urban archeology and the girl with the square glasses. Each chapter hurtles toward the moment when a car hits one of the twins and the man from No. 18 leaps into the street in a vain attempt to save him. And that doesn't even begin to give away the story. In another age, this would be a book everyone had to read.

-- Susan Salter Reynolds

*I'll Take You There

A Novel

Joyce Carol Oates

The Ecco Press: 290 pp., $25.95

With her new novel, "I'll Take You There," Joyce Carol Oates reiterates her position as one of the big talents at the forefront of the most significant movement in American fiction, which is the turning away from the mono-ethnic novel in favor of the frontier where all the issues of integration are raised. From boy meets girl, to God and man, to goods and services, to low-down and dirty politics, integration is the most important theme in literature. That is all writers have ever talked about: how two things quite different or seemingly different can be brought together.

"I'll Take You There," told in flashbacks, takes us back to the 1960s. It is avant-garde in its structure: Three movements function like musical choruses in which themes are laid out, symbols are manipulated, and tools that will appear at the end, like the mirror, keep expanding as the narrator, a female writer, recalls three events from her early womanhood that she realizes are emotionally connected because they all brought her closer to maturity. In each case, she moves from macro to micro, from some big theme or some big situation, to something very intimate, a moment between the narrator and one person. She takes us from a class situation in a sorority house, to an interracial romance, to a confrontation with the face of death as it appears in a sliver of a looking glass used to secretly peep at a dying parent.

Each of the movements is about a spirit having to endure rejection and surmount its own sorrow and its own fear, sometimes asserting itself through a defensive anger that can be self- deprecating or mockingly aggressive. The novel is about six things: self-confidence, bigotry, class, race, parentage and geography. In the song that may have inspired the title of this novel, the Staple Singers tell us that they know of a place where nobody is crying, where no one is worried, where there are no false, smiling faces, where there is no lying to the races, and that they can take us there. Joyce Carol Oates is telling us exactly the opposite. But, instead of depressing us, she lifts our spirits with the tragic optimism that is at the center of her poetic impulse, a force that, word by word, never fails to rise up from the dark, sorrowing bowels of this novel.

-- Stanley Crouch

*I Should Be Extremely Happy in Your Company

A Novel

Brian Hall

Viking: 420 pp., $25.95

While Stephen Ambrose was writing "Undaunted Courage," I accompanied him one summer canoeing up the Missouri River retracing the footsteps of Lewis and Clark. The pristine scenery was magnificent, and at night, around a roaring Montana campfire, we would read passages from the journals out loud. The journals, overflowing with keen observations, illuminate Lewis as both gifted writer and astute naturalist. But what is missing from these priceless journals -- or for that matter, from the hundreds of books written about the expedition itself -- are introspective character profiles of the leading players in the rugged drama.

Brian Hall, author of two previous novels and a handful of nonfiction books, has brilliantly accomplished what Ambrose hoped to do. "I Should Be Extremely Happy in Your Company" -- the title is Lewis' words to Clark inviting him on the expedition -- fills in the blank pages of the Lewis and Clark journals, offering marvelous character studies of five key participants in the historical trek.

Hall, a spellbinding prose-stylist, writes with the kind of ethereal poetic sweep found in the historical novels of Michael Ondaatje and Wallace Stegner. With consummate skill he weaves the true 1804-06 journey with a deep psychological probe of his enigmatic characters' mind-sets. To his credit, he stays as close to the historical circumstances surrounding the expedition as can be hoped for in fiction. There is, in fact, a seamless narrative flow to "I Should Be Extremely Happy in Your Company," which earmarks this hybrid book as approaching the coveted status of classic American literature.

-- Douglas Brinkley

*The Life and Adventures of Lyle Clemens

A Novel

John Rechy

Grove Press: 324 pp., $24

John Rechy, rather like Henry Miller, is best known for his depiction of raw and shocking sexuality and yet best loved by some readers for his expression of a passion so sublime that it approaches a state of rapture. He began in 1963 with "City of Night," a book about the sordid life of a gay street hustler, but he also gave us, for example, "The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gomez," the tale of a poor middle-aged Mexican American woman who is redeemed when she's granted a marvelous vision.

Rechy's novel, "The Life and Adventures of Lyle Clemens," is a potent compound of sex and rapture. Lyle is a beautiful and beguiling young man who starts out as the child of star-crossed lovers in a sleepy Texas town and ends up as "the Mystery Cowboy," an enigmatic figure who materializes among the lost souls on Hollywood Boulevard. This remarkable story, as Rechy tells it, is sly, smart, sexy and laugh-out-loud funny, but it is also tinged with sorrow and ultimately elevated into the realm of magic. Rechy renders the mean streets and the elegant watering holes of contemporary Los Angeles with a wry and knowing sense of humor.

-- Jonathan Kirsch

*Little Infamies

Stories

Panos Karnezis

Farrar, Straus & Giroux: 282 pp., $24

Picture a ramshackle Greek village of no more than 30 houses, a place so far off the beaten track that the government is planning to build a dam on its site and relocate the inhabitants. Envision a crumbling church, a tavern, a barbershop, a butchery, a coffee shop, a dilapidated train station, whitewashed houses and a cast of variegated eccentrics including a sour, narrow-minded, but not entirely unsympathetic priest; a lonely spinster given to afternoon dreams; a clerk who tries to teach his parrot to recite Homer; a landowner so cruel and rapacious, he's a veritable mini-Stalin; and a widower so crushed by his wife's death in giving birth to twin daughters that he keeps the girls chained up like dogs.

The 19 linked stories that make up Panos Karnezis' noteworthy fiction debut, "Little Infamies," reveal a grim bedrock of poverty, superstition, filth, mean-spiritedness and hardship beneath the deceptively picturesque surface of a quaint village. Innocence, sweetness and hope exist, but they often prove to be delusions. Love, when it does occur, all too easily turns into poisonous hate. Karnezis is a deft stylist: clear and direct, yet subtly ironic -- a style well-suited to the short story. And, like many of the masters of this genre -- Guy de Maupassant, Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty - - Karnezis is adept at delivering one startling surprise after another.

-- Merle Rubin

*Lost Light

A Novel

Michael Connelly

Little Brown: 362 pp., $25.95

"Lost Light" is yet one more pungent, hurtling, intricate Michael Connelly caper that thrusts a throbbing read at you. A young woman's murder four years ago, complicated by a robbery-murder on a movie set, further roiled by a coffee shop shooting and the inexplicable disappearance of an FBI agent, are the ingredients of the polyphonic plot that drives LAPD detective Harry Bosch, now retired, to delve for answers to long-unanswered questions. Bosch no longer has a badge nor the resources of the LAPD to help him hack his way through tangles of deceit and danger. But he still has a few friends to lend a reluctant hand when he needs it most. And he has the Mercedes ML55 that he bought after retirement from a guy moving to Florida. The $55,000 price was steep, but not too steep for the fastest SUV on the road and one that blends in, since "every fifth car in L.A. was a Mercedes, or so it seemed." You might ask what's the use of a fast SUV when freeways have turned into parking lots. But "getting there" is half the fun, as Bosch's saxophone instructor says. Although a bit battered, Hieronymus Bosch will get there in the end. A lot of the guys who stand in his way will not.

-- Eugen Weber

*Middle Earth

Poems

Henri Cole

Farrar, Straus & Giroux: 58 pp., $23

In 1949, Wallace Stevens -- 35 years along in his argument that God should be spelled with a lowercase "g" and six years shy of his supposed deathbed conversion -- wrote that "[t]he great poems of heaven and hell have been written and the great poem of earth remains to be written." He was being modest, but happily poets such as Henri Cole continue to respond to his challenge. "Middle Earth," Cole's transcendent fifth collection, is a gift to pagan literature.

A questioning Catholic, Cole finds another religion in seeing. These are the poems of a conjurer, ceremonial and hypnotic. He sets the mood in the title poem, turning down the lights and beginning an ars poetica mantra: "I repeat things in order to feel them, / craving what is no longer there. / The past dims like a great, tiered chandelier. / The present grows fragmentary / and rough."

This collection marks the birth of Cole, a writer in his late 40s, as a poet for a wider audience. He displays his sense of humor and takes an unguilty pleasure in his visions. The animal poems get funny; the creatures are more human and less tame. He is a remarkable fabulist, now writing the poems of his career. "I felt like a realist, recovering from style," he says in a poem. It isn't true: He is still afflicted by great style (and rhythm and rhyme and timing), and the realism -- of emotional pitch and wisdom -- is spectacularly dressed up.

-- Dana Goodyear

*Monkey Hunting

A Novel

Cristina Garcia

Alfred A. Knopf: 258 pp., $23

When writers are likened to jazz musicians, it's usually in admiration of a startling linguistic virtuosity or an unbridled imagination; it might be noted, for example, that a novelist possesses a pyrotechnic energy to match that of Charlie Parker or Dizzy Gillespie. But Cristina Garcia's "Monkey Hunting" is much more like one of those haunting Miles Davis solos. Like the trumpeter, Garcia has a rare gift for concentrating beauty by leaving things out. Here is a miracle of poetic compression, a novel that manages to trace four generations of a family not by revealing every last detail of personal histories but rather by revealing people's dreams, their unuttered concerns and observations -- the things that strike them when they hear the hoot of an owl, or when they try on a pair of their great-grandfather's glasses in front of a mirror.

To inherit the sensibility of one's ancestors is to inherit a mirror that magically stores all of its reflections. Without treacle or trickery, "Monkey Hunting" follows one such mirror's long line of bequeathal, and in doing so presents us with characters we come to care about deeply. We don't follow them throughout their entire lives, and we don't need to get the true sense of who they are. With the confidence of an artist who knows exactly what can be left out, Garcia has made a small masterpiece -- an epic of anecdotes, a vista of brief and beautiful glimpses.

-- Jeff Turrentine

*The Noonday Cemetery And Other Stories

Gustaw Herling

Translated from the Polish by Bill Johnston

New Directions: 282 pp., $25.95

The narrator of these 13 beautifully crafted, mysterious, often unsettling stories is an elderly Polish writer living in Naples, Italy. Ailing and an insomniac, he spends his semi-retirement as a metaphysical sleuth piecing together accounts of ancient and modern acts of unspeakable evil, outbreaks of cruelty and self- destruction, downfalls of illustrious families and cases of moral debasement of seemingly stalwart characters. Though hardly enjoying those spectacles of desolation -- they sometimes make him physically sick -- he seems to be on a personal mission to record some of the devil's more imaginative exploits. The reason for this strange fascination, we are led to believe, is hidden somewhere in his own past. From scattered remarks we learn that he was a soldier in World War II, lived through a shattering personal tragedy and has intimate knowledge of the horrors of the 20th century. In those respects, the narrator is a literary double of the book's author, Gustaw Herling, one of the finest Polish memoirists and fiction writers, who died in 2000.

Written in the last years of the author's life, the stories may at first seem morbid and obsessive. And yet, by the force of Herling's perfectly poised, dispassionate, Stendhalian prose, they show something beautiful, even uplifting in those parables about people at their limits, plunged in total isolation, where they have to decide whether to reject life or to affirm it despite it all. In the face of these two possibilities, the narrative voice remains detached and unprejudiced. Yet the author also lets us know that he would rather stand with those who reach the finish with unconditional defiance. "When it comes down to it, what is hope?" asks Herling, a former prisoner, soldier, exile and witness to his century. "Impotent rebellion against despair. Whoever says that one can't live without hope is simply asserting that one cannot live without constant rebellion."

-- Jaroslaw Anders

*The Other Side of Silence

A Novel

Andre Brink

Harcourt: 312 pp., $25

In 1904-07, the Hereros and other natives of German Southwest Africa revolted against their colonial masters. The Germans brought in Gen. Lothar von Trotha, who, as Thomas Pynchon dryly recounts in his novel "V.," had demonstrated "a certain expertise in suppressing pigmented populations." Von Trotha ordered the extermination of every Herero man, woman and child his troops could find. He "is reckoned to have done away with about 60,000 people," Pynchon says. "This is only 1 percent of 6 million, but still pretty good."

Such atrocities, which prefigure those of the Nazis and of the apartheid regime South African writer Andre Brink spent much of his career protesting against, are the background for Brink's latest novel, "The Other Side of Silence." The heroine, Hanna X, arrives in the colony in 1902 aboard one of the ships that supplied single German women to its sex-starved soldiers, prospectors and farmers. An orphan, intelligent but plain, beaten down by a

childhood of abuse and by housemaid jobs that amounted to indentured servitude, Hanna believes she has nothing to lose by emigrating.

Brink's last novel, "The Rights of Desire," had an elderly hero and an autumnal tone, but there's nothing geriatric about "The Other Side of Silence," in which Hanna, who learned strategy by playing chess with one of her less odious employers in Bremen, is forced to face the moral dilemma of every revolutionary: How can she fight evil without becoming evil herself? This bloody fable, rooted in bloody reality, is one of Brink's most powerful works.

-- Michael Harris

*Our Lady of the Forest

A Novel

David Guterson

Alfred A. Knopf: 336 pp., $25.95

"Our Lady of the Forest" is another virtuoso performance from David Guterson, whose first novel, "Snow Falling on Cedars," won the 1994 PEN/Faulkner Award. His gripping, darkly comic new novel marks an expansion of his vision, a deepening exploration of the richly layered realm of the Pacific Northwest that Guterson has come to own as surely as William Faulkner did his Yoknapatawpha County. Like Faulkner and the magnificent August Wilson, whose cycle of plays chronicles the African American community in Pittsburgh, Guterson sings the song of place with perfect pitch. In "Our Lady of the Forest," Guterson leads us into the still grandeur of the rain- drenched forest of northwest Washington, then unflinchingly dares us to examine the mysteries of faith and redemption. His uncanny sense of place is at work from the opening paragraph. His transporting novel balances on the tension between belief and despair without ever losing its sense of mystery.

-- Jane Ciabattari

*Pattern Recognition

A Novel

William Gibson

Putnam: 358 pp., $25.95

Cayce Pollard is the cutting edge of contemporary culture. An uber-cool young urban woman, Cayce is able to recognize hip trends before they take off, thereby allowing her marketing clients to "commodify" those trends and reap abundant profits. "It's about group behavior pattern around a particular class of object," Cayce explains in William Gibson's "Pattern Recognition," an intriguing novel of technology, art, marketing manipulation and mystery. "I try to recognize a pattern before anyone else does," Cayce explains, and then "I point a commodifier at it."

Gibson succeeds in bringing to light the subtle and sometimes frightening aspects of today's Internet culture. "Pattern Recognition" works compellingly on two levels: As an intriguing mystery with delicious vigor and bite, the novel lures readers into unfamiliar provinces and unforeseen situations to solve the problem at hand. On a deeper level, the tale is a social commentary, taking a long, hard look at the monoculture in which we live: "whatever it is that gradually makes London and New York feel more like each other, that dissolves the membranes between mirror-worlds."

Combining old-fashioned storytelling techniques with a recognition of yet-to-be-defined patterns, Gibson's tale is a robust inquiry into the many (and often veiled) ways that marketing shapes the world in which we live.

-- Bernadette Murphy

*The Photograph

A Novel

Penelope Lively

Viking: 240 pp., $25.95

Penelope Lively's fiction has a retrospective cast. Although she is not a historical novelist in the mode of Mary Renault, Barry Unsworth or A.S. Byatt, she is sensitive to the allure of the past. More accurately, however, one might describe her as a historian of individual consciousness, in particular of the role played by memory in shaping it. Her characters move forward by looking backward.

"The Photograph" is one of Lively's most satisfying novels: cleverly conceived, artfully constructed and executed with high intelligence and sensitivity. It is also a surprisingly suspenseful story, with developments unfolding in two directions, as the characters find out new things about a past they thought they knew and as their radically altered perceptions and feelings continue to sway their relationships. Lively has exceeded herself in her portrayal of these characters. Not only has she created a cast of memorably distinctive and believably complex individuals, but she has also succeeded in the subtle and difficult task of showing us how their feelings and conceptions are being transformed, by the revelations about the past and by their ongoing, sometimes painful, encounters with each other in the present.

-- Merle Rubin

*Poets of the Non-Existent City

Los Angeles in the McCarthy Era

Edited by Estelle Gershgoren Novak

University of New Mexico Press: 274 pp., $19.95 paper

"Poets of the Non-Existent City" is a homage to an era and a place -- Los Angeles in the decade after the end of World War II -- and to the dedicated few poets who worked to create a decent society during the shameful decade of Sen. Joseph McCarthy. A collection of poetry, prose and graphic arts of the era, culled from the pages of the journals California Quarterly and Coastlines, the book brings together 19 poets representing 13 years in the life of the city.

For those who ask what it was like to write under such circumstances, the answer is contained in this remarkable volume from the University of New Mexico Press, and the answer is nothing short of inspiring. "Poets of the Non-Existent City" is also a very useful book -- a handbook for the maintenance of sanity -- for the poets of today as well as anyone else interested in an honest and accurate use of language in the current storm of lies and deceits. Anyone who thinks the American political climate is the worst it's ever been should have a look. We've got no idea what bad is. With a little help from our friends, we might develop the pluck these writers had.

-- Philip Levine

*A Sad Affair

A Novel

Wolfgang Koeppen

Translated from the German by Michael Hofmann

W.W. Norton: 178 pp., $23.95

Like an acrobat poised on a tightrope, or better yet a slack- rope, lurching wildly between the sublime and the ridiculous, German writer Wolfgang Koeppen's amazing first novel, "A Sad Affair," written in 1934, tells the story of one man's obsessive love for an emotionally elusive femme fatale.

The lover is an intensely romantic young student named Friedrich; the object of his devotion, a delicate-looking aspiring actress named Sibylle. Their romance unfolds against the backdrop of pre- World War II Europe, with its cabarets, refugees and looming societal unrest. But in Friedrich's Sibylle-centric mind, the ominous political atmosphere fades to insignificance beside the blazing colors of his grand passion.

Koeppen's seriocomic paean to romantic love was viewed by the Nazis as yet another specimen of decadent art and banned in 1936. In the 1950s, Koeppen trained his sights on the larger picture of politics and society with three powerfully satiric novels about postwar Germany, including the matter of former Nazis finding their way into the government. In a life that spanned almost the entire 20th century, Koeppen, who was born in 1906 and died 90 years later, wrote only five novels. But, as translator Michael Hofmann tells us in his sparkling introduction to "A Sad Affair," when this mercurial and exasperating author did sit down to write, "the results were unexpected and

worth having." Many writers have sung the joys and sorrows of love, the ecstatic agonies of romantic obsession, but few have done so with the sheer ebullience that animates every page of "A Sad Affair."

-- Merle Rubin

*San Remo Drive

A Novel From Memory

Leslie Epstein

Handsel Books: 244 pp., $24

Leslie Epstein is an accomplished and prolific writer, perhaps best known for his tragicomic Holocaust novel, "King of the Jews." But the key to understanding and appreciating his latest book is that he is the son of Philip G. Epstein and the nephew of Julius J. Epstein, the Oscar-winning screenwriters of such Hollywood classics as "Casablanca" and "Arsenic and Old Lace." Epstein's family can be discerned just beneath the surface of "San Remo Drive," a haunting and ultimately heartbreaking account of what it was like to grow up in the movie colony of Southern California in the 1940s and '50s.

"San Remo Drive" grabs and holds our attention -- and our sympathy -- because Epstein allows us to glimpse Hollywood in its golden age through the eyes of someone who knows it firsthand, and he populates the landscape with men, women and children whose fears, yearnings and failings are perfectly credible and wholly compelling. Epstein is a master storyteller at the height of his powers, and his book is a worthy addition to the literature of Los Angeles in general and Hollywood in particular.

-- Jonathan Kirsch

*The Scheme for Full Employment

A Novel

Magnus Mills

Picador: 204 pp., $19

Magnus Mills is a slave driver. Find yourself in one of his novels, and chances are you'd either be a fence builder, an odd jobber, an excavator -- or, in his latest, "The Scheme for Full Employment," a delivery van driver, shuttling spare parts from one depot to another. Less a novelist than a writer of parables, Mills writes fictions that are satiric, didactic, subtle and blatant all at once. His characters have seemingly fallen out of the sky and landed in a world so surreal yet so completely realized that they, and perhaps you, will never once question its strangeness, and while Mills' stories may provide a fair wage for the reader -- humor, provocation, unpredictability and the like -- they come with a hidden cost. But that's in the fine print; for now, The Scheme's the thing.

"The Scheme for Full Employment" contains not only the recognizable small dramas of the workplace but also the larger interplay among the heavyweights of modern labor. It's the Keynesians versus the Von Hayeks, the Fords versus the UAWs, the Stakhanovites versus the shirkers. The lessons that arise may seem inadvertent, as if Mills might have stubbed his toe in the telling, but there's more art and intention in these pages than first meets the eye.

-- Thomas Curwen

*Shroud

A Novel

John Banville

Alfred A. Knopf: 264 pp., $25

Of a certain kind of soprano, it is said in tones of reverence tinged with pity that she never draws attention to her voice but always subordinates it to the requirements of the score. The tinge of pity comes from the fact that such a soprano is always of the second rank. One can no more ask a Wagnerian prima diva like Jane Eaglen not to draw attention to her voice than one can ask Shaquille O'Neal not to draw attention to his size.

So it is with the prose style of John Banville in "Shroud." The style -- the voice -- is a phenomenon, a wonder in itself. It cannot fail to draw attention to itself. Asked in Paris if he was English, Samuel Beckett replied, famously, not "Non" but "Au contraire." Banville, who is Irish, writes English not as if it were Irish (he is from Wexford, not Galway) but, au contraire, as if it were French. He uses it, in other words, with an elegant, seigneurial detachment, as if it were a mistress whose body he knew and enjoyed in every secret detail but whom he would never dream of marrying.

It is a truism that few critics ever manage to write good fiction. Less often noted is the fact that few novelists ever manage to write good criticism. As a group, they like to tell stories and imagine characters rather than pursue arguments and explore ideas. Banville may be, in our day, the supreme exception to this double rule. Thinking back to his boyhood, Axel Vander mocks: "What self? What sticky imago did I imagine was within me, do I imagine is within me, even still, aching to burst forth and spread its gorgeous, eyed wings?" Oh, to be done with such stuff forever! But we never are, and down to the last page of this dazzling novel, neither is the stained and shrouded Axel Vander.

-- Jack Miles

*The Songs of the Kings

A Novel

Barry Unsworth

Nan A. Talese/Doubleday: 342 pp., $26

A mighty army poised to invade the Middle East is delayed by unfavorable weather. Its commander in chief struggles to keep his allies from deserting him. Sports are used as a distraction; religious leaders and the media are enlisted to trumpet the justice of the invaders' cause. The superiority of Western culture is cited. But something more, it seems, is needed -- something to shock and awe all onlookers....

Who knows if Barry Unsworth had the United States and Iraq in mind when he wrote his latest novel, "The Songs of the Kings," but this retelling of the story of Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia -- a story first told in Homer's "The Iliad" and elaborated in dramas by Aeschylus, Euripides, Sophocles, Racine and Goethe -- is meant to strike a disturbingly modern note. "The Songs of the Kings" is a smaller book than Unsworth's monumental and heartbreaking novel of the 18th century slave trade, "Sacred Hunger," which won the Booker Prize in 1992. It's less suspenseful, because we know the outcome. Its characters, though vivid, are further removed from us. But it shares with "Sacred Hunger" an immensely sophisticated grasp of politics, economics and psychology, of how the world works. Then and now, the innocent and the honestly uncertain rarely prevail against people who push a simple, brutal idea relentlessly, much less against those who can dress up that idea in fine-sounding words.

-- Michael Harris

*Soul Circus

A Novel

George P. Pelecanos

Little, Brown: 352 pp., $24.95

"Soul Circus" serves up what George Pelecanos' fans have come to expect and, once again, the effect is sharp and satisfying: a richly textured tapestry, a quirky plot, a large, multicolored cast of lawbreakers, law enforcers, misfits, malfeasants and innocent bystanders. The venue, as always, is Washington, D.C., and alentours. Derek Strange, P.I., works for a local law firm. Through neighborhoods where crickets chirp on summer nights but where you're more likely to get yourself capped than in others, he pursues witnesses for the trial of a gang lord, hoping for evidence that would spare the client's life. Strange's stamping ground teems with gangs and gun dealers who sell cheap guns to project kids and better pieces to more advanced entrepreneurs.

Strange lays his life on the line for a living but also because he wants to save the world or, at least, a few of the kids with no fathers, no education and no exit except prison or death. He succeeds (modestly) because he's unrelentingly professional, honorable and decent. Witnesses and associates die, and so do the criminals, mostly by mutual massacre. But Strange's family thrives and he survives to empathize another day. The novels of Pelecanos are passionate, vital and vigorously demotic. If they have sense, historians to come will plumb them for evidence of how men and women lived, feared and coped in the war zones of everyday life: not only when they preyed on each other but when they talked, loved, listened to music or just wasted time.

-- Eugen Weber

*Southland

A Novel

Nina Revoyr

Akashic Books: 352 pp., $15.95 paper

The plot of "Southland" by Nina Revoyr is distinctly noir, but the point of view is surprisingly rosy. Essentially, the novel is a murder mystery: The young heroine, Jackie Ishida, embarks upon a quest to find out whether her beloved grandfather once bloodied his hands in a multiple homicide. Along the way, however, Jackie rediscovers a time and place in the recent history of Los Angeles that the author conjures up as nothing less than a paradise.

The setting of "Southland" is a neighborhood once called Angeles Mesa and now known as the Crenshaw District. According to Revoyr, the Mesa was once a place of racial diversity and ethnic harmony, a garden spot where palm trees and orange trees grew side by side. "Hopeful newlyweds, coughing factory workers, old sharecroppers with hands hardened by years of labor, all bit into the sweet juicy oranges and thought they tasted heaven," she writes.

Revoyr spins out several parallel narratives in "Southland," deftly skipping back and forth among scenes set in the mid-'90s, the World War II era and the mid-'60s, when the memories of racial harmony in the Crenshaw District were shattered by the ugly reality of racial violence in the streets of Watts. The plot line of "Southland" is the stuff of a James Ellroy or a Walter Mosley novel, but it is elaborately intertwined with strands of urban history, family memoir and personal confession, all of it recounted with a certain sentimentality that one does not expect in hard-boiled fiction.

-- Jonathan Kirsch

*Still Holding

A Novel of Hollywood

Bruce Wagner

Simon & Schuster: 354 pp., $25

Hollywood has attracted novelists -- like moths to the projector? -- since its first flickering images scared theatergoers into thinking a train was coming straight at them. Writers like William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald and, especially, Nathanael West couldn't resist the place, whether they envied or loathed it. Despite (or entirely because of) its unique combination of shabbiness and grandeur, Hollywood enticed them with glorious gushers of greenbacks as well as with the stuff that any author's dreams are made of: a Great Subject.

Yet in recent years most Hollywood fiction has been like most Hollywood movies: a gross spectacle of fancy cars and broken glass. One of the few authors who has managed to convey Hollywood's inanity, vulgarity and venality without partaking of those qualities is Bruce Wagner. Undoubtedly the foremost chronicler of the place since West, whose work his echoes in both vitriol and eloquence, he has pursued this vision from his first novel, "Force Majeure," through the initial two segments of a "Cellular Trilogy," to that sequence's culmination in this season's acidic new offering, "Still Holding." As always, Wagner evinces a fine ghoulish relish for those aspects of human nature that are Hollywood's stock in trade: avarice, covetousness, vainglorious self-promotion, self-delusion and the infinite gradations of degradation and despair.

What keeps a reader holding on till the last page is Wagner's prose, which combines high oratory with low vernacular. The rapture of decay, physical and emotional, is Wagner's ultimate subject, and he's lucky to have a place that feeds his imagination so well. For a writer, a territory to be mined is a precious thing. Imagine Dickens without London, Dostoevsky without St. Petersburg. It's like that for Bruce Wagner and Hollywood. He owns this fetid, steaming lump of a town.

-- Melvin Jules Bukiet

*Ten Little Indians

Sherman Alexie

Grove Press: 244 pp., $24

It's becoming clearer now that "Indian Killer" was an anomaly in Sherman Alexie's career. In that novel, he expressed Native American rage in a raw, direct form. Abandoning much of the humor of his earlier works, such as "The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven" and "Reservation Blues," he envisioned a Seattle of literary poseurs, shock-talk radio and vigilante injustice, inflamed by a serial killer of white men who scalps his victims. But in the short- story collection "The Toughest Indian in the World," the laughter and tenderness returned -- as it does again in Alexie's new collection, "Ten Little Indians." This doesn't mean he ignores painful issues. It's just that he finds subtler ways of making us pay attention. The darkness of Alexie's subject matter is offset by the exuberance of his storytelling. "The Life and Times of Estelle Walks Above" -- a son's loving, exasperated memoir about his mother, whose real surname was Miller -- is full of "notes of historical revision," goofy lists and sex tips. "What Ever Happened to Frank Snake Church?" is about a basketball star who gives up the game to honor his parents and, when they die, takes it up again at the impossible age of 40. But it isn't somber in the telling. There's trash talk galore, a funeral oration that can't keep a straight face ("Ay, jokes!") and, at the very heart of the story, a two-page riff about all the characters Frank plays with on public courts as he tries to recapture his game. Too long to quote here, it's a virtuoso piece whose only real purpose is to tell us that, since Alexie is having such a good time, we can have one too.

-- Michael Harris

*The Wife

A Novel

Meg Wolitzer

Scribner: 224 pp; $23

As soon as the women's movement rose up from an atmosphere of longing and resentment, daughters looked over their shoulders and asked their mothers, "How could you have lived the way you did, pretending, biting the insides of your cheeks, making it easy for men to own everything?" Elders like Grace Paley and Dorothy Dinnerstein were out the door with the daughters, raising hell. Mary McCarthy and Hannah Arendt snickered at feminists who threatened to erase the category of glittering exception in which the two had established their power. Elizabeth Hardwick was so aggrieved by rivalrous female ambition that she published "Seduction and Betrayal," in which, writing about Hedda Gabler, she urged women to find purpose by nurturing the talents of wounded men.

As if responding to Hardwick, Meg Wolitzer's "The Wife" charts the folly of such a course and deftly surveys the motives of a woman who could plot it. Joan Ames tells her story as an apology, an explanation, and as the first book she'll sign with her own name. Like Kafka's ape in "A Report to the Academy" -- who explains how he learned to impersonate a human being and weighs the gains and losses of his transformation -- Joan unfolds the process of becoming a perfect wife.

Wolitzer's unqualified achievement is creating satire that's purged of sentimentality and that seeks to protect nothing. Not marriage, not family life, not traditional arrangements between the sexes, not any of the stations we arrive at after boarding the desire train. "The Wife" is an obituary for the ways men and women have functioned together in the past. For a woman to write, said Virginia Woolf, she had to kill "the angel in the house," meaning the part of her that grooved on martyrdom and stillness. For a woman to become known to herself now, Wolitzer says, she has to jettison her romance with being number two.

-- Laurie Stone

[Illustration]
Caption: PHOTO: (no caption); PHOTOGRAPHER: Lauren Uram For The Times

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BOOK REVIEW; Raw, tender truths from 'Fight Club' hard-hitter; [HOME EDITION]

Carmela Ciuraru. **Los Angeles Times**. Los Angeles, Calif.: Jun 16, 2004. pg. E.1

Abstract (Summary)

"Stranger Than Fiction" includes both journalistic essays and more personal pieces; it's the autobiographical material that proves most compelling. Yet [Chuck Palahniuk]'s voice is so distinctive and intimate -- he writes as though he is recounting a great story to a close friend -- that even the slighter pieces are full of wonderful moments. Anyone who assumes, for instance, that Palahniuk is too concerned with violent and macho material may find those notions overturned. (He devotes a piece to his love of Amy Hempel's fiction and its influence on his writing.)

Palahniuk is a savvy writer, well aware that many readers are more hungry for details of "Fight Club" than castles, of college wrestling, Marilyn Manson or other quirky subjects. So he delivers. Brad Pitt (star of David Fincher's 1999 film adaptation of Palahniuk's book) gets plenty of mention, as do details about its origins: "It's less a novel than an anthology of my friends' lives," he reveals. "I do have insomnia and wander with no sleep for weeks." To eager fans who regularly beg Palahniuk to tell them the locations of underground fight clubs described in the book, he patiently explains that they don't exist because he made them up.

With "Stranger Than Fiction," Palahniuk again proves himself a writer unafraid to expose his own foolish moments and reveal experiences that aroused the most pain and anger. He recalls how his grandfather killed his wife and later himself with a shotgun as Palahniuk's then 4-year-old father hid under a bed. In the summer of 1999, when the "Fight Club" movie came out, Palahniuk's father and a woman he was dating were murdered in Idaho, shot by her ex-husband.

Full Text (928 words)

Stranger Than Fiction

True Stories

Chuck Palahniuk

Doubleday: 234 pp., $23.95

*

Chuck Palahniuk's six novels, including "Choke," "Lullaby" and "Fight Club," share themes of isolation, addiction and nihilism. His characters often yearn for companionship, no matter how dysfunctional or damaging.

In the introduction to his latest book, "Stranger Than Fiction," Palahniuk writes: "If you haven't already noticed, all my books are about a lonely person looking for some way to connect with other people." Every essay in this collection is "about being with other people. Me being with people. Or people being together."

Palahniuk finds that the "one drawback to writing is the being alone. The writing part. The lonely-garret part."

In 23 pieces -- some of which appeared previously in publications such as Gear, Black Book and the Los Angeles Times -- Palahniuk writes expansively on topics ranging from bizarre to tragic, outrageously funny to tender -- sometimes in the same piece. Throughout, he offers insight into his approach to writing fiction: "Each time you create a character, you look at the world as that character, looking for the details that make that reality the one true

reality. Like a lawyer arguing a case in a courtroom, you become an advocate who wants the reader to accept the truth of your character's worldview."

"Stranger Than Fiction" includes both journalistic essays and more personal pieces; it's the autobiographical material that proves most compelling. Yet Palahniuk's voice is so distinctive and intimate -- he writes as though he is recounting a great story to a close friend -- that even the slighter pieces are full of wonderful moments. Anyone who assumes, for instance, that Palahniuk is too concerned with violent and macho material may find those notions overturned. (He devotes a piece to his love of Amy Hempel's fiction and its influence on his writing.)

In "You Are Here," Palahniuk offers a sardonic take on an event in the ballroom of an airport Sheraton Hotel, a spectacle in which desperate writers pitch book manuscripts and screenplays to agents, publishers and movie producers. The material of one's life becomes reduced to a story to be packaged, marketed and sold. (Each writer has paid for the privilege of face time with would-be buyers, and each gets only seven minutes to make a pitch and get lucky.) "Maybe a book contract is the new halo," Palahniuk writes. "Our new reward for surviving with strength and character. Instead of heaven, we get money and media attention."

Palahniuk displays a wry sensibility in "Confessions in Stone," a story about men trying to build their own castles. Whereas other pieces reveal the human longing (and failure) to connect with others, he describes the curious new trend of castle-building as a means of willfully shielding oneself from society's intrusions -- particularly the ever-looming threat of terrorism. "What SUVs are to regular cars," he writes, "these castles are to regular houses. Solid. Safe. Secure."

Palahniuk hilariously profiles Roger DeClements, who has built three castles, replete with drawbridges and dragon statues. "A castle has got to have a dragon," the Washington state man explains. Yet he admits that castles, like all homes, are not without their problems: "I didn't anticipate the problem with the mold."

Palahniuk is a savvy writer, well aware that many readers are more hungry for details of "Fight Club" than castles, of college wrestling, Marilyn Manson or other quirky subjects. So he delivers. Brad Pitt (star of David Fincher's 1999 film adaptation of Palahniuk's book) gets plenty of mention, as do details about its origins: "It's less a novel than an anthology of my friends' lives," he reveals. "I do have insomnia and wander with no sleep for weeks." To eager fans who regularly beg Palahniuk to tell them the locations of underground fight clubs described in the book, he patiently explains that they don't exist because he made them up.

He describes other perils of his post-"Fight Club" fame. In "Almost California," he writes about going to Los Angeles, courtesy of Twentieth Century Fox, and enjoying a lavish hotel room, where he indulges in the mini-bar goodies and the large whirlpool tub. The evening before an important Hollywood meeting, he decides to use a men's depilatory on his head, then proceeds to "hack at my scalp with a razor."

The results are unfortunate: "Tomorrow, I was going to Hollywood. That night, I couldn't get my head to stop bleeding. Little bits of toilet paper were stuck all over my swelled-up scalp. It was a sort of papier-mache look, with my brains inside. I felt better when my head started to scab, but then the red parts were still swollen."

With "Stranger Than Fiction," Palahniuk again proves himself a writer unafraid to expose his own foolish moments and reveal experiences that aroused the most pain and anger. He recalls how his grandfather killed his wife and later himself with a shotgun as Palahniuk's then 4-year-old father hid under a bed. In the summer of 1999, when the "Fight Club" movie came out, Palahniuk's father and a woman he was dating were murdered in Idaho, shot by her ex-husband.

Whether engaging in loopy humor or sorting through the haunting detritus of his own life, Palahniuk writes rigorously, getting the tone just right in each piece. Those readers who appreciate the author's previous work will be satisfied by this wide-ranging collection, which should earn him new fans as well.

[Illustration]
Caption: PHOTO: CONNECTING: Chuck Palahniuk's "Stranger Than Fiction" contains 23 pieces delving into a wide range of topics.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Associated Press

Credit: Special to The Times

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POP EYE; Big Easy's players need work; [HOME EDITION]

Steve Hochman. **Los Angeles Times**. Los Angeles, Calif.: Sep 18, 2005. pg. E.48

Abstract (Summary)

ALLEN TOUSSAINT, one of the architects of New Orleans' storied soul and R&B legacy, is confident about a strong return of his city's musicians after the devastation and diaspora resulting from Hurricane Katrina.

The recording academy is already teaming its MusiCares Foundation with the Guitar Center stores chain and Gibson instruments manufacturer to raise funds for the most severe needs of displaced musicians -- housing, food, medical care and such. Gibson is making a special-edition guitar for sale through Guitar Center with 100% of proceeds going to hurricane relief.

Meanwhile, several one-time events are being planned to raise money and give work to musicians. Gibson and Michael Murphy Productions are collaborating on a concert Oct. 27 at the Gibson Amphitheatre in L.A. A Denver concert, tentatively planned for Oct. 9, is being organized by public radio showcase "E-Town" to present New Orleans musicians.

Full Text (1105 words)

ALLEN TOUSSAINT, one of the architects of New Orleans' storied soul and R&B legacy, is confident about a strong return of his city's musicians after the devastation and diaspora resulting from Hurricane Katrina.

"It's on intermission, but it will never leave. Just come back after the break," says Toussaint, whose writing and production credits include Ernie K-Doe's "Mother-in-Law" and LaBelle's "Lady Marmalade."

But for the musicians, what will there be to come back to? And what do they do in the meantime?

"Fish gotta swim, birds gotta fly, musicians gotta play," says Scott Aiges, music commissioner of New Orleans, who has relocated to New York for the time being.

And to do that, the musicians need two things: Gear and gigs.

Various efforts are now underway to address these matters and try to keep musicians active while waiting to return to the city.

This is not so much for the Neville Brothers, Dirty Dozen Brass Band and others who have a history of national and international touring success but for the hundreds of artists who have made their living from regular gigs in New Orleans' clubs and bars.

Neil Portnow, president of the National Academy of Recording Arts & Sciences, is reaching out to major touring acts and promoters.

"It will be quite a haul until there will be casual dates, street corners to play on, bars and clubs to work in when the tourist trade returns," he says. "Could we find a major promoter to package shows from this community, the Nevilles and all that but also bring along some lesser-known locals?

"Could we get major headliners already on tour to bring along someone as an opening act? This is not about a handout, but a paycheck and dignity to keep them stimulated and active."

The recording academy is already teaming its MusiCares Foundation with the Guitar Center stores chain and Gibson instruments manufacturer to raise funds for the most severe needs of displaced musicians -- housing, food,

medical care and such. Gibson is making a special-edition guitar for sale through Guitar Center with 100% of proceeds going to hurricane relief.

But all three are also exploring ways to replace lost instruments and other equipment, extending such existing initiatives as the Mr. Holland's Opus Foundation, which collects donated goods for distribution to school music programs. Guitar Center chairman and CEO Marty Albertson is open to the idea of his stores being used as drop-off locations for donated equipment that could be sent to the affected Gulf Coast musicians.

Meanwhile, several one-time events are being planned to raise money and give work to musicians. Gibson and Michael Murphy Productions are collaborating on a concert Oct. 27 at the Gibson Amphitheatre in L.A. A Denver concert, tentatively planned for Oct. 9, is being organized by public radio showcase "E-Town" to present New Orleans musicians.

And the seventh annual Voodoo Music Festival, a rock-oriented event that had been scheduled for Halloween weekend in New Orleans' now-swamped City Park, will still emphasize a locally focused Heritage Stage that had been added this year when it is rescheduled for a different city.

On a more individual level, the suggestion has been made that buying CDs by New Orleans artists will help support the music directly. The best source is the website of the independent Louisiana Music Factory store (www.louisianamusicfactory.com), which is still active although its French Quarter store is closed for now.

A tale from beyond the rave

AS one of the key promoters of the Southern California underground rave scene in the late '80s and early '90s, Les Borsai has plenty of colorful stories to tell. But he's chosen to tell them in the form of fiction. Under his full name, Laszlo Borsai, he's written a novel, "The Death of Wizdem," drawing on the real-life dark adventures of his suburban youth and his rise to success in the edgy, drug-filled, hedonistic world of the often illegal electronic dance music parties.

Why fiction?

"It's 85% true," says Borsai, 37, who went on to a legitimate music business career in management, overseeing the band Unwritten Law and other acts. "I think it was easier for me to be brutally honest about most things by being able to embellish a few things. And it does deal with a real death, so I wanted to put a little distance to that."

The novel details an array of antisocial and criminal activities of the main character, nicknamed Grip, and his cohorts, in a prose style Borsai relates to the works of Bret Easton Ellis ("Less Than Zero") and Chuck Palahniuk ("Fight Club").

"There's no accountability or moral stance," he says of both the book and the lifestyle it portrays. "And a single page of redemption. Creating the raves, you envision it and go in and do it. The book was the same thing, a place where I had a voice and didn't have to apologize to anyone and be as brutally honest as I could."

Borsai has self-published the novel, which will be available through his website (www.laszloborsai.com).

The person whose opinions he most fretted over has already read it -- his father, who knew little of the details of Borsai's wayward youth.

"It was terrifying when my dad read it a couple of weeks ago," he says. "The hardest part was writing it. The harder part was having him read it."

Small Faces

* As Gavin Rossdale launches his new band Institute, his past with the band Bush will be featured with a combination DVD and live CD package. The DVD portion of "Zen x Four" will include the group's hit videos, while the audio portion sports nine previously unreleased live performances, some acoustic. The set is due Nov. 1 from Kirtland Records....

* Orange County rockers Thrice got literary for the "Vheissu" album, due Oct. 18 on Island Records. The title is a reference to Thomas Pynchon's vaunted novel "V," while for cover art the band recruited writer Dave Eggers ("A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius"), who created an image in the faux-arcane style familiar to devotees of his McSweeney's` publications....

* "Meshugga Beach Party"? That's the title of one of the albums coming from the Jewish Music Group, a new label created by Rhino Records cofounder Richard Foos and music business veteran David McLees to release a wide

variety of Jewish-rooted or related music. "Beach Party" (subtitled "Twenty Songs of the Chosen Surfer") will feature Jewish music themes played in surf style.

[Illustration]
Caption: PHOTO: TAKE FIVE: Allen Toussaint says that despite hurricane-caused disruption, New Orleans' music scene "will never leave."; PHOTOGRAPHER: Chris Graythen Getty Images

Credit: Special to The Times

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SCRIPTLAND; King of the world of adaptation; [HOME EDITION]

Jay A. Fernandez. **Los Angeles Times**. Los Angeles, Calif.: Sep 20, 2006. pg. E.1

Abstract (Summary)

CORRECTION: SEE CORRECTION APPENDED; Scott Speedman: In the Scriptland column in Wednesday's Calendar section, a photograph of Scott Speedman was intended to accompany an item about the upcoming Bryan Bertino film, "The Strangers," in which Speedman is expected to appear. The caption said that Speedman was returning in "Ocean's Thirteen." He is not in that film and was not in the previous "Ocean's" movies.

Bertino had submitted the script for a Nicholl Fellowship, a $30,000 prize awarded to unproduced writers by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. "The Strangers" got knocked out in the quarterfinals, but Bertino landed a manager and a meeting with Vertigo Entertainment, whose film "The Grudge" had just opened to $39 million. The sit-down was encouraging enough for him to take the risk and quit his job, and within a few days he sold the script to Universal for low six figures against mid-six figures if the film was made. "It was enough that I didn't have to work as a grip anymore," Bertino says.

SCARE: [Liv Tyler] landed the lead in "The Strangers."; PHOTOGRAPHER: Richard Hartog Los Angeles Times; CAPERS: Scott Speedman is back in "Ocean's Thirteen."; PHOTOGRAPHER: Darryl James Getty Images; 'REX MUNDI': [Johnny Depp] is set to star in the film.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Junko Kimura Getty Images

Full Text (1161 words)

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Scriptland is a new weekly feature on the work and professional lives of screenwriters.

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Indiana Jones, meet Jack Sparrow. Jim Uhls, who successfully adapted the "unadaptable" Chuck Palahniuk novel "Fight Club," has been hired to turn "Rex Mundi," a series of graphic novels by Arvid Nelson and Eric Johnson, into a feature for Johnny Depp to star in and produce through his Infinitum Nihil (Infinite Nothing) production company.

"Rex Mundi" (King of the World) posits an alternate present of 1933 in which the Reformation never happened, the Inquisition is still in full swing, Europe remains dominated by the Catholic Church and the rest of the world consists of colonies. Depp, who became the biggest movie star in the world this summer by reprising his Keith Richards-inspired swashbuckler, would play a pathologist investigating the mysterious death of the priest who found him as an orphan.

"It's a noir-ish 'Raiders of the Lost Ark,' " Uhls says. "There are murders and a mystery, and the lead character discovers a massive conspiracy, biblical in its origin." Though it may sound an awful lot like a "Da Vinci Code" rip-off, Depp will surely sport less offensive hair than Tom Hanks, even if he decides to base this new character on John Lydon (Johnny Rotten).

From rags to writer on the back of fear

Two years ago, 28-year-old Bryan Bertino was just a gaffer on commercials and low-budget independent films, hoping to accumulate enough hours to get into the electrician's union.

Smash cut to today, and the Texas-born handyman has been reborn as a newly minted writer-director, with a go picture, "The Strangers," at Universal, which begins shooting in three weeks in a desolate stretch of South Carolina on a $10-million budget. Liv Tyler scored the female lead after actresses as diverse as Thandie Newton and Oscar winner Charlize Theron circled the project looking for a dark suspense picture to give their careers a shot of adrenaline.

Bertino's offering ingeniously mixes highbrow and low, realistic romantic turmoil and in extremis primal terror. On their way back from a wedding (in February!), a couple in their mid-20s decides to forgo the hotel for a night in the house in which the man's family grew up. In the midst of all the relationship turmoil that milestone events such as this stir up, three extremely antagonistic strangers intrude (one of whom will look like 19-year-old Aussie supermodel Gemma Ward, in her unfashionably hostile acting debut). Who gets to keep the "Zoolander" DVD quickly becomes the least of the couple's worries.

The screenplay is deft, economical and dread-filled; it couples a detective's ominous voiceover catalog of items found at the scene with the disturbing imagery of the horrible events' aftermath. The script then quickly shifts back in time to the couple's middle of the night entrance in mid-fight, which provides a realistic, original twist on the standard introduction of the victims. With plot and thematic elements that evoke the claustrophobic thrillers "Open Water," "Straw Dogs" and "Panic Room," the intense experience that follows begs each moviegoer to wonder, "How would I behave if it were me?"

"What I wanted to do was focus in on their relationship and then take this outside force that is more of a traditional horror idea of bad people and play off of it," Bertino says. "I just tried to think about what I was most frightened of, and the moments that I'm most frightened are my girlfriend waking me up in the middle of the night and saying, 'I think there's someone in the living room.' So the whole idea came about as, 'What if you went into the living room and there was somebody there?' "

Bertino had submitted the script for a Nicholl Fellowship, a $30,000 prize awarded to unproduced writers by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. "The Strangers" got knocked out in the quarterfinals, but Bertino landed a manager and a meeting with Vertigo Entertainment, whose film "The Grudge" had just opened to $39 million. The sit-down was encouraging enough for him to take the risk and quit his job, and within a few days he sold the script to Universal for low six figures against mid-six figures if the film was made. "It was enough that I didn't have to work as a grip anymore," Bertino says.

His good fortune grew when music video auteur Mark Romanek, writer-director of the dark drama "One Hour Photo," refused to make the film for less than $40 million. (He insisted on building the neighborhood on a soundstage that he could control so he wouldn't have to resort to computer-generated cold-weather breath.) So the studio offered the novice screenwriter the gig instead. Bertino will have to fit his directorial debut into a packed schedule that includes writing the sharp, genre-blending horror scripts he owes Hollywood mega-producers Jerry Bruckheimer and Scott Rudin.

To celebrate, Bertino purchased his first suit and a TV.

Back to crime scene in 'Ocean's'

Poor Brad had to abandon the quiet solitude of Namibia (and the not-so-quiet company of Angelina, Shiloh, Maddox and Zahara) so he could rejoin his extended family of millionaire actor friends in the Valley to shoot "Ocean's Thirteen," yet another installment of the aren't-we-clever heist franchise. (Not to worry: Word is that the studio has provided the hardworking cast with a full-scale re- creation of Lake Como on the Warner Bros. lot to ensure that the ensemble retained the "magic.") The January draft of the screenplay, by the "Rounders" team of Brian Koppelman and David Levien, has Rusty, Danny, Linus and the gang re-forming in Vegas to avenge the flamboyant Reuben Tishkoff (Elliott Gould), who's been rooked by a Steve Wynn-type master of the universe named Willie Banks (Al Pacino). Their revenge caper? To engineer a nine-minute window during which every single gambler at Banks' casino wins.

But the moment the franchise had Julia Roberts playing Julia Roberts, wasn't it clear that Soderbergh and Co. were down to the felt? Only Julia had the sense to pick up her chips and head for the high-minded, Oscar-saturated safety of "Charlie Wilson's War," which stars Tom Hanks and Philip Seymour Hoffman and is directed by Mike Nichols.

Comments and tips can be sent to fernandez_jay@hotmail.com

[Reference]
Message No: 50274

[Illustration]

Caption: PHOTO: SCARE: Liv Tyler landed the lead in "The Strangers."; PHOTOGRAPHER: Richard Hartog Los Angeles Times; PHOTO: CAPERS: Scott Speedman is back in "Ocean's Thirteen."; PHOTOGRAPHER: Darryl James Getty Images; PHOTO: 'REX MUNDI': Johnny Depp is set to star in the film.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Junko Kimura Getty Images

Credit: Special to The Times

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The riled ones; Rant An Oral Biography of Buster Casey Chuck Palahniuk Doubleday: 322 pp., $24.95; [HOME EDITION]

Steve Almond. **Los Angeles Times**. Los Angeles, Calif.: Apr 22, 2007. pg. R.8

Abstract (Summary)

CHUCK PALAHNIUK'S eighth novel is frantic, inventive, sporadically insightful and frequently sickening. His fans will love it; those of you who are not part of the Chuckgeist may find "Rant" tough to savor. Composed as an "oral biography," the book assembles hundreds of brief testimonials to document the rise and fall of a peculiar young man named Buster "Rant" Casey. Rant is a small-town rebel addicted to animal poison, who moves to the big city, triggers a rabies epidemic, joins a nocturnal cult dedicated to car wrecks, dies in a fiery crash, is resurrected and travels back in time to save his mother from conceiving him via rape committed by an immortal sociopath. You know, that old template.

Because of his, er, rabid following among disaffected youth and his knack for social satire, Palahniuk is often compared to Kurt Vonnegut. But Vonnegut never relied on grisly injuries or potty humor to seduce his audience. He was genuinely heartbroken at the state of modern man and the atrocities we commit and tolerate. His contempt for authority never seemed a pose. I can't say the same of Palahniuk. He's expert at eliciting the easy emotions of our age -- grievance, envy and rage -- but has little interest in the difficult ones: shame, fear or love. The result is books like "Rant," chaotic joyrides that glance in interesting directions before skidding off to the next thrill. Nor did Vonnegut ever traffic in the juvenile myth that masochistic violence offers a path to spiritual liberation (a line Palahniuk has been pushing since his debut, "Fight Club").

Full Text (895 words)

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True, the construction of a plausible (or coherent) plot has never stood in the way of a Palahniuk production. Nor has the wearying task of character development. He writes in a firmly adolescent mode, with an emphasis on homoerotic alienation, mayhem and bodily fluids. In calmer moments, he also manages a sly wisdom. ("Any lone weirdo comes from a big nest of weirdos. What's weird is, you go to some pigsty village in Slovakia, and suddenly even Andy Warhol makes perfect sense.") Or there's this aside on a teenager with rabies: "The symptoms are brooding and antisocial behavior, isolation alternating with fits of hostile aggression. If the CDC treated every teenager that showed those symptoms ... well, no government has that much money."

Mostly, though, the author engages in the pursuit of stomach- turning details. We get extended riffs on venereal disease, genital odor, used feminine products, boogers and so on. This is known in political circles as appealing to the base. He's much more compelling when he resists the easy jolt of gross-out humor. Still, it's probably overstating the case to call "Rant" a novel of ideas. It's closer to a novel of notions, facile ones for the most part but often delivered with a welcome tenderness. "Walking out with Rant Casey, time had a habit of getting stopped," one friend recalls of their midnight rambles. "Those stars, the same old hand-me-down stars as folks still wish on now." Another pal notes wistfully, "Maybe people don't travel back in time. Maybe it's lies like that, anything that smells better than the idea of death -- black, inky, forever death -- it's those kind of sexy lies that set up world religions."

The book's central notion is the human need to aggrandize one's history and create a personality cult, concerns Palahniuk comes by naturally. He's also interested in how technology and extremism reshape our world. He's

created an urban dystopia in which half the citizens work at night, as an oppressed underclass. Traditional entertainments have been replaced by implants that "boost" experiences straight into one's nervous system. And the government, in response to the rabies outbreak, has turned proto-fascist. Palahniuk has a ball with such sci-fi flourishes and with his sprawling cast of narrators. (He shifts from bumpkins to starchy academics to sputtering conspiracy-mongers, often on a single page.) His targets are never much in doubt: the tyranny of the rich, screen addiction and governments that ignore due process -- evils relevant to our present circumstances.

The guy clearly has the imagination and linguistic virtuosity required to transport us into his outlandish worlds; that alone marks him as a major talent. But "Rant" also isolates Palahniuk's glaring novelistic flaw: his need to entertain at the expense of moral or emotional concerns. He'd rather show us his characters' mutilated innards than their internal lives. He'd rather fire buckshot at boogeymen than explore how we betray our consciences. He'd rather please the masses than challenge them.

Because of his, er, rabid following among disaffected youth and his knack for social satire, Palahniuk is often compared to Kurt Vonnegut. But Vonnegut never relied on grisly injuries or potty humor to seduce his audience. He was genuinely heartbroken at the state of modern man and the atrocities we commit and tolerate. His contempt for authority never seemed a pose. I can't say the same of Palahniuk. He's expert at eliciting the easy emotions of our age -- grievance, envy and rage -- but has little interest in the difficult ones: shame, fear or love. The result is books like "Rant," chaotic joyrides that glance in interesting directions before skidding off to the next thrill. Nor did Vonnegut ever traffic in the juvenile myth that masochistic violence offers a path to spiritual liberation (a line Palahniuk has been pushing since his debut, "Fight Club").

In "Rant," we hear about the priapic pleasures of spider bites and the communal joys of causing car wrecks and "Party Crashing." As one wayward youth notes: "Haven't oppressed people always gone to church for comfort? ... Haven't all your major revolutions brewed as people complained together and sang songs and got riled up to take violent action? Wasn't Party Crashing our church ... ?" This, I guess, is the Palahniuk call to arms. Gentlemen, start your engines! Or maybe it's an unintended critique of his constituents. After all, the prime impulse in his brave new world is a tendency to revel in the gruesome tragedy of others. He calls it "the Rubberneck Effect." Precisely.

[Illustration]
Caption: PHOTO: Chuck Palahniuk; PHOTOGRAPHER: Shawn Grant Doubleday

Credit: Steve Almond is the author of the forthcoming essay collection "(Not That You Asked)."

Indexing (document details)

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Killing moons; Bad Monkeys A Novel Matt Ruff HarperCollins: 232 pp., $20; [HOME EDITION]

Los Angeles Times. Los Angeles, Calif.: Aug 5, 2007. pg. R.7

Abstract (Summary)

[MATT RUFF]'s rotwood prose reads more like bad pulp fiction than convincing conversation. "We need you in the present day," says Bob True, one of the Panopticon superiors. When [Jane] stakes out one of her victims, she observes a "shopping bag full of soup cans [which] caught him square in the face." I didn't realize it was possible for even Cyrano's proboscis to be elegantly entangled in a web of Warhol, but no matter.

Ruff also recycles ideas from his previous novels, diminishing his narrative depth. He has a nonconformist father, like "Fool on the Hill's" Walter Smith, say, "You had a life. It was hoped you'd do something with it." Near the end, the multiple personality disorder carefully researched in "Set This House in Order" resurfaces in a crude good-Kirk, bad-Kirk-style revelation that had me pining for the enemies within Chuck Palahniuk's "Fight Club" or Doestoevsky's "The Double."

Full Text (541 words)

MATT RUFF'S imagination has spawned kangaroo trials administered by telepathic purebred dogs, a Volkswagen Beetle haunted by Abbie Hoffman, a one-armed 181-year-old Civil War veteran and a virtual reality programmer suffering from multiple personality disorder. But Ruff's fourth novel, "Bad Monkeys," finds the Seattle author working against these wild imaginative instincts, settling for ho-hum mayhem in the form of an interrogation transcript buckled together by short omniscient chapters.

The interlocutee in question is one Jane Charlotte, who shares the name of Philip K. Dick's twin sister, confessing her life of murder to police psychiatrists. Jane, working by day at convenience stores, is involved with an underground organization called Panopticon, which specializes in killing "Bad Monkeys," people deemed disreputable by the shadowy higher-ups and subsequently whacked with an NC (short for "natural causes") gun that disguises these homicidal hits.

But take away the gimmicks and "Bad Monkeys" is a pedestrian thriller. Kid on the lam grows up and falls in with the wrong crowd, turns to crime. Ruff asks us to believe in the preposterous idea that there are secret instructive messages in the Fresno Bee and, worse yet, that there is a secret camera in a Marlene Dietrich poster in Jane's bedroom recording all of her sexual trysts. Ruff can't seem to decide whether he wants to be Baron Mnchausen or Philip K. Dick.

There's more persuasive vivacity to be found in nearly any issue of Brian Azzarello's "100 Bullets," an ongoing comic book involving comparable criminal conspiracies. Instead of playing Jane and her victims against each other, as Azzarello would, Ruff makes Jane curiously detached from the killings, not even deigning to collect a paycheck for her "second job." There are reasons for this, which are later explained, but the reader is left in the meantime with lumbering execution.

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bad-Kirk-style revelation that had me pining for the enemies within Chuck Palahniuk's "Fight Club" or Doestoevsky's "The Double."

Ruff does show flashes of the philosophical underpinnings found in his previous work. Near the end, Jane begins to question her motives, asking: "But what if evil was more than just a label for antisocial behavior?" Ruff also includes some asides on altered- state theory and "the Nod problem" -- a glaring continuity error in the Bible.

Ruff has achieved something with these tricks, but his talents are better suited to expansive worlds rather than this embedded chicanery. Had this novel embraced more of the odd, it would have contained fewer Nod problems.

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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK; Sundance festival revels in 'Water'

Kenneth Turan. **Los Angeles Times**. Los Angeles, Calif.: Jan 27, 2008. pg. B.3

Full Text (1069 words)

At the Sundance Film Festival, 2008 became a banner year for large bodies of water as "Frozen River" took the grand jury prize for drama and "Trouble the Water" walked off with the top documentary award at the fest's closing-night ceremonies Saturday at the Racquet Club here.

Written and directed by Courtney Hunt and set in upstate New York, "Frozen River" costars a magnificent Melissa Leo and Misty Upham as two women who face desperate economic straits and turn to smuggling illegal immigrants across the Canadian border. Acquired at the festival by Sony Pictures Classics, this is a powerful story that makes strong emotional connections.

"Trouble the Water," co-directed by Tia Lessin and Carl Deal, starts with the harrowing home movie footage that New Orleans resident Kim Roberts shot of Hurricane Katrina and evolves into a remarkable story of community resilience in the face of government indifference. Roberts, who came to the festival more than nine months pregnant, gave birth to a baby girl in Salt Lake City the day after her film's premiere.

On the world cinema side, James Marsh's riveting "Man on Wire" took both the jury prize and the audience award for world documentary. Treating French aerialist Philippe Petit's 1974 walk between the Twin Towers of New York's World Trade Center like a daring bank robbery, this exhilarating film makes you shake your head in amazement. The extraordinarily single-minded Petit, who was in Park City for the premiere, insisted, not surprisingly, that "life should be lived on the edge of life."

Three other festival films won two awards each, starting with the rigorous "Ballast," the rare Sundance film also to be in competition in Berlin, which took the dramatic directing award for Lance Hammer and the cinematography award for Lol Crawley. Shot with nonprofessionals in the Mississippi Delta, "Ballast" is a deliberate, beautifully artistic film that deals with the effects of a suicide on three people with a complex emotional history.

Alex Rivera's "Sleep Dealer" won the Waldo Salt Screenwriting Award as well as the Alfred P. Sloan Prize for a film with science or technology as a theme. A visually exciting sci-fi epic with a strong sense of social commentary, "Sleep Dealer" created a fully realized world on a shoestring budget.

Director Rivera, who had terrific assistance from cinematographer Lisa Rinzler, said at the premiere that his crew went beyond teamwork into "collective delirium and insanity."

The world cinema screenwriting award went to France's Samuel Benchetrit for his "I Always Wanted to be a Gangster."

In the world cinema dramatic category, Sweden's "King of Ping Pong," amusingly bleak in the classic Scandinavian manner, took the world cinema jury prize for director Jens Jonsson and the cinematography award for Askild Vik Edvardsen. Two other films won cinematography awards: the documentary "Patti Smith: Dream of Life," shot by Phillip Hunt and Steven Sebring, and the world documentary "Recycle" by Mahmoud Al Massad.

Aside from "Man on Wire," Sundance gave three other audience awards: The dramatic prize went to Jonathan Levine's teen comedy "The Wackness"; the documentary prize to "Fields of Fuel," Josh Tickell's look at the oil crisis; and the world cinema dramatic award to Amin Matalqa's "Captain Abu Raed," Jordan's first feature film in half a century.

Though they didn't win anything, two other docs found favor with Sundance audiences, most notably "Stranded: I've Come From a Plane That Crashed in the Mountains." The story of the aftermath of a 1972 plane crash in the Andes

in which 16 young men survived for 72 days by eating the flesh of those who died has been told before in "Alive!," but "Stranded" improves on that with penetrating interviews with the survivors.

During the question-and-answer session at the film's premiere, director Gonzalo Arijon, a friend of the survivors since childhood, introduced Roberto Francois, one of the two men who walked for an excruciating 10 days through the mountains to reach help. Francois held the audience spellbound as he talked about what the experience had meant to him. "Make plans for 100 years," he said, "but you must be ready to die at any moment."

In a different vein altogether was Sacha Gervasi's endearing "Anvil! The True Story of Anvil," likely the only heartwarming film ever made about a heavy metal band. It follows the affable members of Canada's longest-lived metal group as they depart on the most comically haphazard rock tour since the fictional days of "This Is Spinal Tap!"

Not getting any awards on the dramatic side was "Sugar," written and directed by "Half Nelson's" Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck. Made with care and concern and a nice sense of unforced reality, it follows a young baseball prospect from the Dominican Republic as he struggles to adjust to rural America's minor leagues.

At the crosstown Slamdance Film Festival, one film, Greg Kohs' "Song Sung Blue," a documentary about a Milwaukee-based singing duo that covers Neil Diamond songs, won both the grand jury prize and the audience award. The grand jury prize for narrative went to Tom Quinn's "The New Year Parade," and the narrative audience award was given to Ryan Piotrowicz's "The Project."

Sundance's dramatic directing award went to Nanette Burstein's "American Teen," based in Warsaw, Ind. On the world side, documentary directing was given to Nino Kirtadze for "Durakovo: Village of Fools," and the dramatic prize went to Russia's Anna Melikyan for the whimsical "Mermaid." There were also two editing awards: to world documentary's Irena Dol for "The Art Star and the Sudanese Twins" and to Joe Bini for his work on the powerful competition doc "Roman Polanski: Wanted and Desired."

Despite having given out all these awards, the Sundance juries were not ready to quit and handed out four more special jury prizes. The recipients were Ernesto Contreras, director of "Blue Eyelids"; Lisa F. Jackson, director of "Greatest Silence: Rape in the Congo"; Chusy Haney-Jardine for "Anywhere, USA"; and the ensemble cast (Sam Rockwell, Anjelica Huston, Kelly MacDonald and Brad Henke) of "Choke," written and directed by Clark Gregg and based on the novel by "Fight Club's" Chuck Palahniuk. And with that, Sundance rested.

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kenneth.turan@latimes.com

Credit: Times Staff Writer

[Illustration]
Caption: PHOTO: NEW ORLEANS SAGA: Carl Deal, right, accepts the award for "Trouble the Water." His wife, Tia Lessin, left, co-directed. With them is Scott Roberts, whose wife, Kim, shot the footage of Hurricane Katrina that opens the film.; PHOTOGRAPHER:Myung J. Chun Los Angeles Times

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He seems normal; Chuck Palahniuk's a polite guy. His books? That's another story.

Scott Timberg. **Los Angeles Times**. Los Angeles, Calif.: May 19, 2008. pg. E.1

Abstract (Summary)

"Fight Club," his 1996 debut, was about guys who go to office jobs tasting their own blood after getting in touch with their masculinity through basement brawls. Besides publishing nine novels, with total sales nearing 3 million copies, as well as a book of stories and an engaging portrait of Portland, Ore., "Fugitive and Refugees," Palahniuk has managed one of the most difficult feats of the publishing world: appealing to the elusive readership of young males.

Full Text (1716 words)

At the very least, "Snuff" is a difficult book to discuss over dinner. With its assemblage of nasty fluids -- bodily and otherwise -- and its over-the-hill-porn-star heroine who plans to copulate literally to death by taking on 600 men in quick succession, it's also nearly impossible to describe without squirming.

But for Chuck Palahniuk, the author of the novel, which comes out Tuesday, the book is just another chance to push the envelope. His is a nearly scholarly detachment from his subject matter. He discusses his story of paunchy, naked men and lurking vaginal embolism with a friendly, smirk-free smile behind wire-rim glasses.

A handsome, well-exercised 46-year-old with an almost Midwestern politeness, Palahniuk was looking back over his writing career at a funky restaurant that was once Ginger's Sexy Sauna, a massage joint that offered more than just a cure for a bad back.

Digging into his steak, he began talking about Annabel Chong, the USC student who offered herself as the object of a record-breaking mass sex scene in 1995.

"The fact that it was so unresolved was very attractive," Palahniuk said of the cultural dissonance between those who considered Chong a take-charge feminist and others who condemned her as a moral travesty. His novels, he said, come from that sort of muddy debate, "things that the culture really can't talk about openly."

Palahniuk's method is to sniff out such subjects, then pounce. "Things that last in the culture tend to be those unresolved issues," he said. "Like Ira Levin's 'The Stepford Wives' was a wonderful, entertaining way to discuss what Susan Faludi would later call backlash. Levin did that again with women's health and abortion with 'Rosemary's Baby.' He was always so ahead of the curve."

Of course, android housewives and devil babies are highly metaphorical and nuanced compared with Palahniuk's subjects. "Fight Club," his 1996 debut, was about guys who go to office jobs tasting their own blood after getting in touch with their masculinity through basement brawls. "Choke," the 2001 novel that opens as a film in August, concerns a sex addict who raises money by choking on dinner in fancy restaurants. And now there's "Snuff," which finds new ways to connect sex and death.

"It's always about finding these cultural bugaboos," he said, "things that people can't talk about openly, and creating a metaphor that lets people deal with it."

A constant gardener

CULTURAL bugaboos have been good to Palahniuk, whose work Michael Silverblatt has described as part of the "transgressive fiction" genre. These days the writer, who came out as gay in 2003, lives with his partner and his

dogs on eight acres along Washington's scenic Columbia River gorge, including a large garden to which he admits to being pathologically devoted.

Besides publishing nine novels, with total sales nearing 3 million copies, as well as a book of stories and an engaging portrait of Portland, Ore., "Fugitive and Refugees," Palahniuk has managed one of the most difficult feats of the publishing world: appealing to the elusive readership of young males.

He's like the world's coolest camp counselor, the sort who looks out for his kids and isn't above telling a few dirty stories and buying them beer.

The horror of the body, a revolt against consumerism and regeneration through violence are his recurring themes.

Detractors have said he's reached young men with a catalog of gross-out horrors. "We get extended riffs on venereal disease, genital odor, used feminine products, boogers and so on," Steve Almond wrote in his Times review of "Choke." "This is known in political circles as appealing to the base."

That base throngs to his legendary readings for a chance to meet their hero, and he doesn't want to let them down. More than 100 people, he said, have passed out at his readings of a short story called "Guts," about a teenager's catastrophic misadventures while masturbating.

"What a joy that was to read," said Palahniuk, recalling those appearances and looking wistful. "I wish I could read that for the rest of my life."

Palahniuk grew up in the Washington desert, first in a mobile home with his parents and then, after his father left, on his grandparents' farm.

He moved to Portland in 1980, right after graduating high school. It was still the punk era, and Palahniuk was turned on by the aesthetic he heard in bands like the Germs and Generation X.

"Punk songs all sounded alike," he said. "They started really intense, for 2 1/2 minutes, and then ended abruptly. And I found that really colored my taste in short stories. I wanted a story to enter midstream, and then go for several pages, and then end on these rushed, clunky notes."

He found this quality in his favorite writers, such as Shirley Jackson and Stephen King and the writers of Ellery Queen mysteries, and tried to bring it to his own work. One of his earliest efforts -- a scene about a teenager who orders a blow-up sex doll -- showed him, when he presented it at a workshop, the power of the written word: His fellow writers, he said, told him it was too upsetting. "And they asked me to leave."

Palahniuk came to writing late: He wrote "Fight Club" -- which opens with its narrator holding the barrel of a gun in his mouth, feeling the silencer holes with his tongue -- in his early 30s. He was working as a diesel mechanic and honing his prose by reading to drunk, hostile audiences in bars.

From the pits to Mr. Pitt

THAT first novel sold so poorly that it came close to being pulped. Then the "Fight Club" film, directed by David Fincher and starring Brad Pitt and Edward Norton, bombed at the box office but developed into an enormous cult move on DVD -- "A Clockwork Orange" for a younger generation. (His family has had its share of violence: In 1999, Palahniuk's father, who as a child watched his own father kill his wife and years later was shot, and then incinerated, by the husband of a woman he'd met through an ad.)

As Palahniuk went from a voyeur of the underground to a famous cult writer, some things became more difficult. He researched that first novel and another by eavesdropping on support groups for alcoholics and for the terminally ill. He'd still be observing them if fame hadn't made his image too familiar.

"It's storytelling," he said of the meetings. "It's better than TV. It's just one incredible story after another. And it's such an inventory of storytelling devices: The way people hold themselves, what they do with their hands when they speak. And people who go on a regular basis are really performers: They have really honed their craft to get the best possible reaction. . . . So it's just a joy!"

The ideas, these days, literally come to Palahniuk. "Now people seek me out to tell me their stories."

It happened after "Survivor" when a call girl and an exotic dancer approached him and gave him a window into their worlds and helped fill in "Snuff." "When I got out on the road and meet people, I don't have to say a word: They say everything."

His method resembles that of a traveling, pre-modern storyteller.

"Sundays tend to be a day where just I do nothing but visit people," he said. "It's kind of like trick or treating.

"If somebody tells me a great story, I'll tell the story at the next house I visit, and if it resonates with them, and they tell me a different version of the story. After two or three households I've got these themes built out in a way I could never imagine from my own experience."

He doesn't bring a notebook: If a story sticks with him after a full day out, he's onto something.

Then, despite all the fame and success, Palahniuk does what he's been doing since before his first published novel: He takes the ideas to his weekly writers group and then listens to find out which stories connect.

Knowing his audience

BY THE time his writing reaches his "cult" -- the rabid young readers who come to his readings and camp out on his website, he's ready.

Many of these fans have limited experience with literary events. "They are going to their first reading, and they are so afraid it's gonna suck," he said. "That's one of my reasons to make readings kind of over the top. . . . You just don't want to break their hearts."

Dennis Widmyer, a Los Angeles based filmmaker who created the author's official site, in 1999, called the effect "a frenzy." "The most popular e-mail I'm getting is 'Why can't Chuck come here?' " said Widmyer, 30. "That's Australia, that's Asia, that's South America. But he can only be in so many places at once."

When he was in college, at the University of Oregon, in the '80s, Palahniuk saw a porn film of which he remembers almost nothing except one accidental scene. "There was a moment when the couple or the three-way, or whatever, is going at it, by a mirrored headboard. And behind this frenzy of sexual activity, you could see this folding table, and people standing around with cigarettes and Cheetos and Big Gulps -- and bored out of their minds."

This offstage tableau is the setting of most of "Snuff"; a character complains that the cattle-call is "worse than jury duty." It's hardly a setting that would attract most novelists. To Palahniuk, though, it's a chance to take the traditional elements of character and put them in a place they've rarely been before.

It's no different, he said, than Mozart's opera, "The Abduction From the Seraglio."

"In the movie," he said of "Amadeus," "everyone's shocked that he's gonna set this opera in a bordello, in a harem. It's seen as completely corrupt. But then they recognize that despite the setting, and the salacious nature of if, it's still about love."

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scott.timberg@latimes.com

Credit: Times Staff Writer

[Illustration]
Caption: PHOTO: PROVOCATEUR: "It's always about finding these cultural bugaboos," says the author of the new novel "Snuff."; PHOTOGRAPHER:Bruce Ely For The Times; PHOTO: SCHOLARLY: The author wrote "Fight Club" in 1996.; PHOTOGRAPHER:Bruce Ely For The Times

Indexing (document details)

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Databases selected: Multiple databases...

THE SMART LIST; Apatow stands up; Lego Knight

Denise Martin. **Los Angeles Times**. Los Angeles, Calif.: Sep 21, 2008. pg. E.3

Abstract (Summary)

Based on a novel by Chuck Palahniuk, who also wrote "Fight Club," "Choke" revolves around a self-proclaimed sex addict and penniless con man (Sam Rockwell) and his dysfunctional relationship with ailing mommy dearest Ida (Anjelica Huston).

Full Text (358 words)

Lucky ticket-holders can talk about: "Judd Apatow Presents an Evening of Comedy" at Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre. Hollywood's comedy "it" man will perform some rare stand-up with surprise special guests (Michael Cera, Michael Cera, Michael Cera). (Saturday)

Like it or not, the kids will talk about: Demi Lovato's "Don't Forget" and Pussycat Dolls' "Doll Domination." Disney Channel star Lovato prefers metal band Lamb of God to her pop brethren, so expect her album to be less cutesy. Expect the Pussycat Dolls' to be more . . . Pussycat Doll-like. The disc is 16 tracks long -- and features a bonus 17th track: the group's take on "Perhaps, Perhaps, Perhaps." (Tuesday)

And while the kids are busy, you can talk about: TV on the Radio's new album. There's no Bowie this time around, but he'd probably be pleased by the experimental band's latest, "Dear Science," already said to be even better than 2006's "Return to Cookie Mountain." Art-rock you can dance to. (Tuesday)

Still not over Batman? You could talk about: Lego Batman: The Videogame. Just don't go looking for the brooding "Dark Knight." You can, however, spy potential villains for the next film. The game includes the original Robin -- Dick Grayson, now called Nightwing -- old-school baddies such as Scarecrow and latter-day villains such as Harley Quinn. (Tuesday)

Go ahead and talk about: "Choke." But not if you have mother issues. Based on a novel by Chuck Palahniuk, who also wrote "Fight Club," "Choke" revolves around a self-proclaimed sex addict and penniless con man (Sam Rockwell) and his dysfunctional relationship with ailing mommy dearest Ida (Anjelica Huston). At one point, she gets him mauled by a wildcat. (Friday)

You still want to talk about: "Ugly Betty"? Last season's finale left us wanting. Not because the Henry-versus-Gio debate was left unresolved but because both guys, initially so promising, had been reduced to whining do-nothings by the end. The writers have to know it too. Can't you just hear our heroine declaring, "I choose me!" already? (Thursday)

-- Denise Martin

[Illustration]
Caption: PHOTO: Demi Lovato has kids rocking.; PHOTOGRAPHER:Los Angeles Times; PHOTO: Must Betty choose a guy?; PHOTOGRAPHER:Mitch Haddad ABC

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Databases selected: Multiple databases...

Doing right by the book; Director Clark Gregg wanted his first film, 'Choke,' to be good enough to appease the novel's rabid fans.

Mark Olsen. **Los Angeles Times**. Los Angeles, Calif.: Sep 24, 2008. pg. E.8

Abstract (Summary)

Dual roles Gregg has one of those "I know that guy" faces from his career as an actor -- he's currently on the television show "The New Adventures of Old Christine," appeared briefly in this summer's "Iron Man" and has a small role in "Choke."

Full Text (965 words)

When actor/writer Clark Gregg first read "Choke" more than seven years ago, he felt such an immediate connection to the material that he became determined to make it his directorial debut. Written by the cult novelist Chuck Palahniuk, the book had all the shock and subversion one might expect from the author of "Fight Club," but Gregg also connected to an underlying sweetness in the pages that caught him by surprise.

"It felt like something I'd been waiting for," Gregg said in a recent interview, "mixing an equivalent of an incredibly irreverent dirty joke with something that felt like a punk, black romantic comedy."

Gregg's cinematic adaptation of the novel, which hits theaters on Friday, covers a lot of ground, chronicling the life of the character Victor Mancini (played in the film with sleazy panache and unlikely charm by Sam Rockwell) as it explores just how low one can go before finding moral redemption.

In the throes of his own sex addiction, Victor prowls 12-step groups for easy picks-ups, while also scamming money on the side bilking people who save him when he fakes choking in restaurants. His mother (Anjelica Huston) is a former political radical who is losing herself to dementia. At the facility where she is being cared for, Victor meets a pretty young doctor (Kelly Macdonald) who convinces him that his mother believed him to be fathered from the DNA of Jesus and can prove it. The story also includes a friendly but dim stripper, a kindly chronic masturbator and a historical reenactment theme park.

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Dual roles

Gregg has one of those "I know that guy" faces from his career as an actor -- he's currently on the television show "The New Adventures of Old Christine," appeared briefly in this summer's "Iron Man" and has a small role in "Choke." He made his debut as a screenwriter with his work on the Robert Zemeckis thriller "What Lies Beneath," and since then, he has toggled between work as an actor as well as a writer, though none of his subsequent screenplays has been produced.

Gregg admits that he has been "in and out" of recovery programs himself through his life, and so Victor's quest to quell his inner demons was something that resonated in a personal way. Yet it was Gregg's reading of "Choke" as a romantic comedy that convinced Palahniuk that he had found the right guy to shoot his book.

"Almost everything I do is a romantic comedy," Palahniuk said during an interview while at this year's Sundance Film Festival, where the film was picked up after its premiere by distributor Fox Searchlight Pictures. At Sundance, the film also won a special jury prize for best work by an ensemble cast.

Palahniuk noted that most of his books have been or are under some kind of option for a film adaptation but that it takes a specific sensibility and something of a strong stomach to bring his dark, subversive stories to the screen.

Gregg only had a brief telephone conversation with Palahniuk before setting off to adapt "Choke," one in which the author's only real instructions were "don't be too faithful." After many drafts over several years, writing in-between acting jobs, Gregg finally finished a script he was happy with.

Though Palahniuk spent a few days on-set while "Choke" was shooting in New Jersey, Gregg had his hands full with the film's brisk 25-day schedule, so the two didn't actually get to spend much time together until Sundance and more recently while promoting the film.

"You expect some cross between an ultimate fighter and an anarchist and Jonathan Swift," Gregg said of the well-cultivated mystique around Palahniuk. "And he's got this attitude that's insanely genuine and weirdly wise. He really sort of talks about the book as if it's something he gathered from a lot of sources, some very personal and some not at all. He wants to talk about the stuff I added and the connections I made between the characters he created. Strangely, those are his favorite parts."

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Facing the fan base

Once he finished the film, the prospect of facing Palahniuk's notoriously rabid and loyal fans, who often turn his readings into rock star events -- people frequently faint -- was an intimidating prospect for Gregg.

"At screenings there's always someone who says, 'How could you have taken out that line?' " recalls Gregg. "And I always think, 'Dude, it wasn't easy. It was painful for me too.' "

At a recent post-screening Q&A, Gregg slyly answered a question regarding the budget of "Choke" by noting that if "Fight Club" was made for $63 million, "Choke" cost about $60 million less. He hopes the distinctions between the films will be apparent.

"I don't want to get into the game of condescending to that audience," he said of the fans of the "Fight Club" movie and Palahniuk's books. "I feel like they'll understand the difference between these two books and these two movies. At the end of the day, the only obligation I had was to make a good movie out of this."

As the multi-year trip Gregg has made bringing his version of Palahniuk's "Choke" to the screen comes to an end, the filmmaker still can't quite believe it's happening.

"In the years the script was being developed," he said, "way too many people looked at it as incredibly dark and not funny. It wasn't until the first screening at Sundance, when people laughed, that I was sure that it wasn't one of those incredibly vile dirty jokes that I love and that usually clear a room."

Credit: Special to The Times

[Illustration]
Caption: PHOTO: A FAN: "I'd never read anything that was that sad and that funny, or that graphic," said Gregg.; PHOTOGRAPHER:Lisa Maire Associated Press

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Subjects:	Novels, Motion picture directors & producers, Motion pictures -- Choke
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MOVIES; REVIEW; 'Choke': Identity crises of hedonist; Sam Rockwell's talent for sardonic aloofness serves a film based on Chuck Palahniuk's novel.

Robert Abele. **Los Angeles Times**. Los Angeles, Calif.: Sep 26, 2008. pg. E.4

Abstract (Summary)

Scruffy and sloppy, and not without a filthy charm, "Choke" is writer-director Clark Gregg's adaptation of Chuck Palahniuk's 2001 novel of sex addiction and mother issues, and it plays out not unlike its central character's life: fumbling toward sentimental closure but ironically surer-footed on matters of debauchery and comic meanness.

Full Text (440 words)

Scruffy and sloppy, and not without a filthy charm, "Choke" is writer-director Clark Gregg's adaptation of Chuck Palahniuk's 2001 novel of sex addiction and mother issues, and it plays out not unlike its central character's life: fumbling toward sentimental closure but ironically surer-footed on matters of debauchery and comic meanness.

Lizardy indie stalwart Sam Rockwell takes his gift for sardonic aloofness to new heights as Victor, an adolescent-minded hedonist with a serious case of the pretends. He goes to sex addict group therapy meetings mostly to hook up. He's an uncommitted historical re-enactor -- along with his compulsively masturbatory pal Denny (Brad William Henke) -- for a touristy Colonial village. In restaurants, he deliberately chokes on food so rich people can unwittingly "save" him and later feel honor-bound to bankroll his life, which includes regular visits to an expensive psychiatric hospital to visit his mentally deteriorating mother (Anjelica Huston). And even there he begrudgingly goes along with the vivid visitation delusions of the other elderly female patients (a feisty, enjoyable acting bunch that you can tell are having the time of their day-player lives.)

But of all his identity crises, what galls Victor is that Mom doesn't recognize him anymore, and with a childhood that consisted of her frequently kidnapping him from foster homes, it's no wonder he develops romantic feelings for her pretty, no-nonsense, white-jacketed caretaker (Kelly Macdonald), who talks optimistically of cures, experiments and family questions resolved. Oh, yeah, and that there might be proof Victor is a clone of Jesus.

If David Fincher's movie of Palahniuk's "Fight Club" was the epically styled version of the novelist's hipster nihilism, first-time director Gregg -- a fine actor who gives himself a funny little role as Victor's officious Colonial boss -- embraces the immediacy of a film hammered out on a low budget and a demonic verve.

The lively 16-millimeter grain, Rockwell's loose performance and the sketch-like nature of the rude humor (mostly involving Victor's various sexual misadventures) give "Choke" the feel of an extended short, and that isn't a bad way to approach the dark comedy of Victor's stunted growth. It just doesn't always emotionally ground the story involving Huston, an actress better at sustained moods of dominance than intermittent bursts of wackiness.

As the story of a wallowing pig, "Choke" is often pretty entertaining, but when it comes to where-do-I-come-from poignancy, it can't always keep from gagging.

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"Choke." MPAA rating: R for strong sexual content, nudity and language. Running time: 1 hour, 32 minutes. In general release.

Credit: Special to The Times

[Illustration]

Caption: PHOTO: FAMILY TIES: Anjelica Huston and Sam Rockwell play mother and son.; PHOTOGRAPHER:Fox Searchlight

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FALL SNEAKS / THE DIRECTORS; He punked up the rom-com

Michael Ordona. **Los Angeles Times**. Los Angeles, Calif.: Sep 7, 2008. pg. E.17

Abstract (Summary)

[...] "Choke," the fourth novel by "Fight Club" scribe Chuck Palahniuk (rhymes with "politic") came his way: a heartwarming tale of a sex addict whose mother is lost in dementia and who, as Gregg puts it, "deliberately chokes on food so that he can form parasitic relationships with the wealthy people who Heimlich him."

Full Text (498 words)

Clark GREGG, one of those actors everyone recognizes as the strait-laced good guy -- see also: "The West Wing," "The New Adventures of Old Christine" -- was looking for his first film project to direct. Then "Choke," the fourth novel by "Fight Club" scribe Chuck Palahniuk (rhymes with "politic") came his way: a heartwarming tale of a sex addict whose mother is lost in dementia and who, as Gregg puts it, "deliberately chokes on food so that he can form parasitic relationships with the wealthy people who Heimlich him."

Um, how nice for him.

"I got nothing but 'What are you doing?' looks for quite a while," Gregg says with his habitually ironic, thin-lipped hint of a smile. "Many, many people felt this is just too dark. Yet I feel a lot of the best comedy comes out of painful stuff. If you describe 'Little Miss Sunshine' in a couple sentences, it makes you want to go home.

" 'Choke' defies pitching, it's kind of an impossible synopsis to give. And yet that's kind of its strength."

The extent of Palahniuk's sage advice during the five-year adaptation process was, according to Gregg, "Please don't be too faithful to the book."

"I called him up and said, 'I feel like at the heart of this, it's almost like a punk romantic comedy.' And he said, 'Perfect. That's exactly right.' And that was it," says Gregg. But since the film's early showings at festivals, "He's been nothing but an advocate."

During the quest for financing for the film -- which opens Sept. 26 -- with some potentially controversial elements (see also: sexual deviation; Christ complex), Gregg heard the material was "execution-dependent" -- meaning not the sort of thing investors were happy to see a first-time director attempt. But things came together quickly after he recruited Sam Rockwell ("Confessions of a Dangerous Mind") for the lead, paving the way for stars such as Anjelica Huston and Kelly Macdonald ("No Country for Old Men") to come onboard.

"Sam's an actor other actors want to act with," he says. "While I know there were things about the script that Anjelica responded to, she was certainly wary about it and I really believe Sam's presence is what got her to sit down with me and talk about it."

In January at Sundance, the cast won a Special Jury Prize for Dramatic Work by an Ensemble.

So far, audiences have not rioted at screenings. But the available sample may not be representative of the mainstream filmgoer.

"The places it has shown have been Sundance -- good luck shocking somebody at Sundance -- and CineVegas -- good luck shocking anybody in Vegas -- and Comic-Con. I may be walking into a wall of public reprobation, but what are you going to do?" he asked with a mischievous grin. "It feels true to me."

Credit: Special to The Times

[Illustration]
Caption: PHOTO: GAG ORDER: "Choke" is actor Clark Gregg's first feature directorial effort.; PHOTOGRAPHER:LISA MAIRE European Pressphoto Agency

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ProQuest

Databases selected: Multiple databases...

NEW RELEASES; 70 years of L.A. on display

Noel Murray. **Los Angeles Times**. Los Angeles, Calif.: Feb 15, 2009. pg. E.10

Abstract (Summary)

The performances are superior -- especially Angelina Jolie's Oscar-nominated turn as a single mother coping with the aftermath of a botched missing-child investigation -- and the story is wider in scope, encompassing police corruption and gender politics in '30s Los Angeles.

Full Text (558 words)

Changeling

Universal, $29.98; Blu-ray, $39.98

It wasn't as big a hit as "Gran Torino," but "Changeling" is in many ways the best of the 2008 Clint Eastwood-directed films. The performances are superior -- especially Angelina Jolie's Oscar-nominated turn as a single mother coping with the aftermath of a botched missing-child investigation -- and the story is wider in scope, encompassing police corruption and gender politics in '30s Los Angeles. The Blu-ray adds a special feature that compares L.A. from the '30s to now. The DVD adds only two Jolie-specific featurettes.

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Body of Lies

Warner, $28.98/$34.99; Blu-ray, $35.99

A few years ago, a big-budget action thriller directed by Ridley Scott and starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Russell Crowe would've been a sensation. Instead, this story of a CIA operative and his morally ambiguous mentor suffered from a general cultural fatigue with war movies and Scott-style visual bombast. Perhaps now that "Body of Lies" is on DVD and Blu-ray, viewers can enjoy the movie for the smartly written, two-fisted combat flick it is. Both discs include deleted scenes, a lengthy behind-the-scenes documentary and a commentary with Scott, "Lies" novelist David Ignatius and screenwriter William Monahan.

--

Choke

20th Century Fox, $27.98

As Chuck Palahniuk adaptations go, "Choke" doesn't have the depth or kick of "Fight Club," but writer-director Clark Gregg is to be commended for turning Palahniuk's story of a sex-addicted con artist (and historical reenactor) into a fluid, at-times- poignant comedy. Or maybe the credit should go to Sam Rockwell, who plays "Choke's" lovable creep with just the right mix of guile and heart. Rockwell also shines on the "Choke" DVD's entertaining commentary track (shared with Gregg), and in the disc's handful of deleted scenes and bloopers. And Gregg acquits himself nicely in a brief-but-thoughtful conversation with Palahniuk.

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High School Musical 3: Senior Year

Disney, $29.99/$34.99; Blu-ray, $39.99

The Disney Channel movie "High School Musical" has won the hearts of countless teenager-obsessed youngsters with its elemental story of caste-jumping and dream-following among sparkling-clean suburban adolescents. The third film in the series -- and the first to be released theatrically -- bids farewell to soft-featured cutie Zac Efron and indistinctly ethnic brainiac Vanessa Hudgens. Although it lacks the effervescence of the original, director Kenny Ortega maintains a light touch and breezy pace. The "HSM3" Blu-ray and double-disc DVD editions contain an extended version of the film, plus multiple featurettes.

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Religulous

Lionsgate, $29.95

In "Religulous," firebrand comedian Bill Maher delivers a stand-up routine masquerading as a documentary, in which he rants about the dangers of organized religion and lets his interview subjects talk long enough only to make them look stupid. The movie's methodology is more than a little unfair, and the premise off-balance, but the movie is funny. Maher's pro-atheism points -- though likely familiar to anyone who ever sat around a dorm room talking God -- are worth reasserting. Maher might be preaching to the converted here (so to speak), but even religion-haters deserve a liturgy. The "Religulous" DVD amps up the Maher, with a commentary track (also featuring director Larry Charles) and bonus Maher monologues.

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Also this week

Flash of Genius

Universal, $29.98

How to Lose Friends & Alienate People

MGM, $27.98

Quarantine

Sony, $28.96; Blu-ray, $39.95

[Illustration]
Caption: PHOTO: Angelina Jolie plays a single mom whose child is missing.; PHOTOGRAPHER:Tony Rivetti Jr. Universal Pictures

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BOOK REVIEW; The devil on his shoulder; In This Way I Was Saved A Novel; Brian DeLeeuw Simon & Schuster: 296 pp., $25

Eryn Loeb. **Los Angeles Times**. Los Angeles, Calif.: Aug 2, 2009. pg. E.6

Abstract (Summary)

DeLeeuw ably pulls off what seems at first to be a questionable conceit, with echoes of the destructive, delusional protagonists of Chuck Palahniuk's "Fight Club," and that book's attendant questions about masculinity and self-deception.

Full Text (788 words)

On a New York City playground one cool November day, 6-year-old Luke Nightingale meets Daniel. After they spend the afternoon together battling invisible dinosaurs, Luke invites the boy home to play. "Later, I liked to remind him that he came looking for me first," Daniel explains early in his stubborn, unsettling narration. "I didn't ask for any of it."

From the very first pages of "In This Way I Was Saved" -- Brian DeLeeuw's assured, unnerving first novel -- the boundaries between what's real and imagined shift and bleed together. The two boys are inseparable, and it's clear from the outset that something about their friendship is not quite right. Daniel appears to have emerged out of nowhere, and Luke's mother, Claire -- recently divorced and alarmingly volatile -- is oblivious to her son's ever-present new friend. Daniel himself is precocious and conniving; he stirs up much of the action yet somehow remains outside of it. Strangeness builds and swells.

After Daniel overestimates his standing and pushes the other boy too far, Luke tries to break free. He manages to keep him at bay for 10 years, until one bleak night -- compelled by his mother's deterioration and his own teenage despair -- Luke calls upon his old friend. This time, Daniel is determined to make his influence known. "I wanted him to recognize that without my help, without drawing me closer to him, he would only continue to humiliate himself," Daniel claims, with characteristic arrogance.

Although he's a constant presence, and couldn't be more real or threatening to Luke, Daniel doesn't exist in a form anyone but Luke can see. Still, because the story is told from Daniel's toxic, misanthropic point of view, he seems more vital than his pale, fumbling counterpart.

Daniel's condition is intimately tied to Luke's state of mind, and especially to his weaknesses. His appearance is dictated by the whims of his host, his face taking on "the shape of Luke's loneliness." If Luke summons the will to subdue him, Daniel might look down and see himself wearing a straitjacket. To avoid this, Daniel works hard to gain Luke's trust, while undermining him at every turn.

Though it's tempting to see him as a product of Luke's childhood distress, Daniel cannot be easily explained as a split personality or imaginary friend; psychosis and trauma account for part of his being, but the story unfolds around a grain of something even more sinister and elusive. DeLeeuw's fine, taut prose conjures vivid images that hint at danger: Learning to read, a young Luke finds a tricky word "curled in on itself like a worm poked by a stick." A bully has "a face like a closed fist." An upended carton of Chinese food provides "a greasy geometry lesson." A boy's tequila-tainted breath smells like "gasoline and baking pavement."

DeLeeuw ably pulls off what seems at first to be a questionable conceit, with echoes of the destructive, delusional protagonists of Chuck Palahniuk's "Fight Club," and that book's attendant questions about masculinity and self-deception. He draws us into a world where psychological warfare is a way of life, and his characters' understandings of who they are develop into a gripping mystery. Suspense and anxiety drive the narrative -- DeLeeuw is clearly fascinated by the workings of the human mind, using his characters to explore how perceptions can provoke us, and to wonder about the extent to which we're truly responsible for our own actions.

Luke's vulnerability is what makes Daniel possible, and Daniel preys on it. He depends on Luke -- is obsessed with him -- but he's also confined by him. Ultimately, he despises him. And so the two boys are defined by their extremes: Luke is basically good, while Daniel is the fiend hunkered down on his shoulder, whispering taunts. Luke is devoted to his damaged mother; Daniel is repulsed by her. Daniel hungers for sex, while Luke is cautious around girls. It's unclear which boy is more "real," but Daniel's feelings have more urgency and a stronger pulse. So, is Luke just a victim, a fragile shell that will eventually fall away? And who is to blame for Daniel's crimes?

Midway through the book, DeLeeuw offers a labored glimpse into Luke's dark family legacy, and later, he introduces something of a whodunit subplot. Both feel like needless distractions from the tense, doomed drama between the protagonists. As the book chills to a close, revelations add layers of calculated cleverness to what is, at its heart, a straightforward story about an elemental conflict. When DeLeeuw focuses on these two fractured parts of one whole, his portrait of dangerous minds is at its most haunting and persuasive.

Credit: Loeb is a writer in New York City.

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