

CHOKE ON THIS

It's May Day in activist-heavy Portland, Oregon. The police are in full riot gear, expecting protesters to rampage through the downtown area like miniature Marxist Godzillas. All this would be peachy with Chuck Palahniuk, whose (somewhat literally) explosive first novel, *Fight Club*, struck more nerves with the nation's angry young men than a trip to a sociopathic dentist. His fourth and latest book, *Choke*, promises to do for sex addiction what *Fight Club* did for self-destruction: turn it into the year's best read. In an interview with A&F's Sean T. Collins, Chuck broke "the first rule" and talked all about it.

The *Fight Club* film raised quite a ruckus. I'd imagine the experience was pretty strange for you. Oh, it was. It was also really comforting and familiar, because almost everything in the book and in the movie are things that me and my friends have done. We were out of college and we got the dream jobs that we wanted and we were making enough money to see past the idea that if we started buying the right sort of things we would be happy. We suddenly realized what we had bought into our whole lives—we just fast-tracked ourselves right into acquiring things and dying. The End. So in a way the movie was like this big video scrapbook—our high school album for our 20s. On another level, it was sort of offensive that people found it so disturbing, because, "Hey, guy, this is my life. This is the lives of most people I know. What makes it so offensive? This is our reality."

There's a line in your new book that reads, "He assaulted the world by assaulting himself." That seems to be a running theme in your work—almost a punk rock ethos. Well, I think in order to really reinvent yourself you have to destroy your current identity. And the fastest way to do that is to destroy how you look, destroy what you see in the mirror. But on another level it's about having visual proof that you've experienced something transcendent. When you see a punk with a safety pin through their cheek, you think, "Oh my God, I could not endure that. What pain that must have been." You're sickened by it. In a way, it's a badge of some kind that says you've experienced something extraordinary.

***Choke* is about a different kind of self-destruction, though.** In the wake of how offended people were by *Fight Club* the movie, I was thinking, "What can I do that would be even more offensive to those people in particular? Well, how about a dark comedy about sex instead of violence?" So I started looking into that, and I realized how many people I knew defined themselves as sexaholics and were going to sexual-compulsive meetings. So I went to Sex Addicts Anonymous, SAA, for about six months, and the stories that people told were just extraordinary.

Going to Sex Addicts Anonymous meetings sounds like a punch line waiting to happen. Well, it's funny because I was really struck by how sex addicts are acknowledged in our culture by "They're a big joke." They're the cheerleader who gets her stomach pumped and it's full of cum. Or they're the old man who flashes little children. You know, they're perverts and nymphos, but when you go to these meetings and you see that they're just really these ordinary people, on one level you're really shaken because they have such extraordinary private lives that even their spouses and children don't know about. On another level it makes you absolutely

not trust anyone. **If you see just how ordinary these people are who are talking about giving 50 blow jobs in an evening, suddenly you're thinking, I'm never trusting another person ever again. And I'm washing my hands a lot more.** You know?

But people are saying that *Choke* is the second half of *Fight Club*, because at the end of *Fight Club* the book there's the concept that no matter what you get over personally, people are still gonna view you as whatever you were before. That's why it's so easy to slide back—people will always treat you like what you were, rather than the thing you are now. *Choke* is about finally resolving that external expectation to be a certain way, and deciding for yourself how you're going to be. So in a way, the two are sort of bookends that complete the process.

Did this come from something that happened in your life, in terms of people's view of you? Boy, I guess in a way it did. Working at Freight Liner as a mechanic, which is what I did for 13 years after college, I was resigned to the fact that I never would be published, and so I wrote *Fight Club* out of that huge resignation. "Fuck it. I'm never gonna get published, so why not write what I want to write?" I've always found that you can only be a cynic for so long. Our whole culture is so cynical and so sarcastic and so ironic, it's just about to tip over an edge into romanticism. I see the turn of the century as the ultimate act of cynicism: It was gonna be a disaster, everything was gonna crumble, and then it was the ultimate letdown because nothing happened. I see us poised before this sort of enormous romantic renaissance. I'm just seeing it in all the people I interact with.

Do you see what you're doing as an opportunity to get ideas out there to influence people who need them? Well, it's always about bringing myself to a place that surprises me. I have no idea where the books are gonna go or how they're gonna end when they start. If it doesn't keep me interested and excited and really amaze me at the end, then I know there's no way that I can do that to anyone else. So it's always about me first. But ultimately, if it can surprise other people, that would be amazing. Boy, that didn't answer your question at all. That was just bullshit, wasn't it?

No, no, no! I'm sorry we weren't tear-gassed. It would've made a great story. With crowds of black-handkerchief anarchists bashing the A&F windows—*how cool*.

Chuck photographed at Portland's own Hung Far Low by Chris Chapman.

