

ANDREW B LANG

[MENU](#)

JOY LUCK CLUB

REVIEW OF “FIGHT CLUB” BY CHUCK PALAHNIUK



Perusing through the bookstore the other day, I chanced upon this book in one of the more remote corners of the shelf and thought how this was a book I had yet to read. At the time *Fight Club* was being released in theaters, I was joining the U.S. Armed Forces and was on my way to basic training. I had never heard of Chuck Palahniuk, nor of his novel and only learned about the story, like so many others, through the film adaptation starring a young Brad Pitt and Edward Norton. Its cinematic release was an instant hit that captivated even younger men like myself, who for whatever reason romanticized the notion of fisticuffs. The idea of fighting, openly at that, was both foreign and innate. It was something you just didn't do, but secretly wanted to. Basic combat training, or *Boot camp*, was

the perfect outlet then for this strange fascination that beset many of my peers. Hand-to-hand in the sand pits of Fort Sill was where we vented our frustrations, but for what exactly? Were we upset about things in the same way Tyler Durden and the unnamed narrator in *Fight Club* were? Was there something more deeply rooted going on amongst those of us “men” who became infatuated with Chuck Palahniuk’s work? Having since read the book, I look back at that time in my life, at a pivotal moment really, and see how I was moving on from that small town (“corn-fed” as my uncle called it) mentality, moving on to bigger and better things – what those “things” were I had yet at the time to figure out exactly, but I was moving on, nonetheless. Considering all that the 90’s represented, a conundrum of cultural shifts and fluxes, the decadents of a century, moreover a millennium, taking form for us through boyish tendencies and primal acts of infighting, Chuck Palahniuk’s debut novel definitely offered a fresh look at the counter-culture that was emerging in response to these shifting dynamics that were marking the turn of the millennium. Like his protagonist, I was also at a turning point in my life and needed something to change. And that was what this book was ultimately about – change.

In many ways, *Fight Club* is an uncomplicated book from a narrative standpoint; its short chapters (a total of 30 over a 208-page novel) reveal a sequence of unlawful events that are seemingly piece-mailed together and make up the basic premise of the story: the unnamed narrator who meets Tyler Durden, who forms Project Mayhem, a terrorist organization devoted to the oxymoronic notion of organized anarchy, who becomes victim to his own whims. One reviewer puts what this book is doing well into perspective, where the initial fight forms the club, a “new religion and secret society for males who want to reclaim their instincts as hunters within a society that has turned them into consumers. Fight Club provides a space in which men can transcend the reality of their lifestyle, their jobs, and their bodies. The club begins to present the body as a site of power and resistance to its followers, through violence and destruction” (Byrne). This transcendence taking place occurs through a baptism in pain, with the temple of the body being cleansed of its repression. It is in this transformation that we find the real complexity to *Fight Club*, the story, emerging.

The First Rule of Fight Club...

And painfully complex it was. Not the kind of pain you would associate to a woman during childbirth. That kind of pain is real and intrinsic; no, the pain dealt with in this book was expressed in one of the only ways a man can express his pain, outwardly, in a violent kind of way. Not necessarily so in the beginning of the book, though; not while the unnamed narrator (from this point on, known only as *first person* for the consistent use of “I” throughout the book)

was sulking in his misery, looking for an outlet. No, *first person* was taking his pathetic existence to a whole new pessimistic level, one that seems iconic for Palahniuk, based on what I gather from an impression of his other works. *First person* finds some sort of relief by going to support groups for terminally ill people – Chloe suffering from her brain parasite from the group “Catch-Up Rap” being a good example (Palahniuk 35) – and these narratives are what give him his release. “‘You cry,’ Bob [with testicular cancer] says and inhales and sob, sob, sobs. ‘Go on now and cry.’ The big wet face settles down on top of my head, and I am lost inside. This is when I’d cry.... Anything you’re ever proud of will be thrown away. And I’m lost inside. This is as close as I’ve been to sleeping in almost a week” (17). As early as chapter 2, we’re offered this look at his release and how absorbed he becomes in the painful existences of those he visits in these groups. All of this, his “vacation” as he calls it, is interrupted the moment Marla Singer enters the picture. “The only woman here at Remaining Men Together, the testicular cancer support group, this woman smokes her cigarette under the burden of a stranger, and her eyes come together with mine. Faker. Faker. Faker” (18). The irony of *First person’s* commentary not withheld. The impact of her presence is revealing to his inner turmoil. He confesses:

Walking home after a support group, I felt more alive than I’d ever felt. I wasn’t host to cancer or blood parasites; I was the little warm center that the life of the world crowded around. And I slept. Babies don’t sleep this well. Every evening, I died, and every evening, I was born. Resurrected. (22)

This is not the only time the theme of resurrection is brought up in the book. Enter Tyler Durden.

First person goes to support groups for release. Marla Singer ruins his outlet by revealing herself as a faker, forcing him to recognize the truth of it – that he’s a faker, too – so we are then introduced to Tyler Durden, the hero of the novel of sorts who challenges *First person* to take control of his life. “This is your life, and it’s ending one minute at a time” (Palahniuk 29), the book often reminds us. Add the insomnia *first person* starts the book off with, and those become very long minutes. That leaves plenty of time to think about it ending. It is more about existing than it is living, and the misery of *first person* is compounded all the more by the underlying themes of consumerism found throughout the story. Tyler Durden is the one character who grounds *first person* to what is real. He forces *first person* to take a look at himself, to break away from his life of commodity, to regain control of his life. As Palahniuk tells the reader in the afterword of his book, “Really what I was writing was just *The Great Gatsby*, updated a little. It was ‘apostolic’ fiction – where a surviving apostle tells the story of his hero. There are two men and a woman. And one man, the hero, is shot to death”

(Afterword 216). Before we can reiterate the resurrection reference made in the previous paragraph and in Palahniuk's words quoted here, we should jump back to the 90s to look at that cultural shift that was happening.

Looking Back

Countless sources will vouch for the fact that this is a story about masculinity. Palahniuk himself tells us even that his story is about masculinity, challenged by a feminist ideal that, at the time, was prevalently being displayed throughout many pop cultural references. He writes about the motivations that inspired him to write *Fight Club*:

At the time, I'd seen a Bill Moyer television program about how street gangs were really young men raised without fathers, just trying to help one another become men... At the same time, the bookstores were full of books like The Joy Luck Club and The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood and How to Make an American Quilt. These were all novels that presented a social model for women to be together. To sit together and tell their stories. To share their lives. But there was no novel that presented a new social model for men to share their lives. (Palahniuk, Afterword 214)

The point in his quote about street gangs raising men without fathers is worthy of attention as these very words are found coming from one of the disciples for Project Mayhem, who lectures to *first person*, as if to check his devotion: "If you're male and you're Christian and living in America, your father is your model for God. And if you never know your father, if your father bails out or dies or is never at home, what do you believe about God?...What you end up doing... is you spend your life searching for a father and God... What you have to consider... is the possibility that God doesn't like you. Could be, God hates us" (Palahniuk 141). This insightful quote reveals a lot about the Freudian issues at work in the protagonist, along with all the other males that are found in this book; they are all men with daddy issues lashing out against a society where everything is provided for and men have no purpose but to be a part of it. Pain and fear is the only truth that reminds us of who we are, our individuality, Palahniuk seems to tell us, and that gives us a sense of our own self worth. Our ability to conquer this is what shows the strength of our resolve. This is why Project Mayhem operatives go out searching for people, forcing them at gun point to explain what they want to do with their lives, because from one day to the next, it could all end. It is existential thinking at its finest. The same way of thinking took place during the 1890s, during the *Fin-de-Siecle*.

To Be Resurrected

From all that can be seen of the fighting and terrorist acts, the book is not nihilistic, contrary to what some reviewers think (“[Fight Club](#)”). It is about depression on a massive scale. On a generational scale. An entire generation of men, who don’t feel like themselves, who don’t really feel like they are men, who have been raised fatherless by women, who are repressed. When you’re a man, you’ll likely agree that this is hardly anything new for a man to do, to repress his feelings and hide how he really feels, which brings us back to one of the reemerging themes of the book – resurrection. *First person* rationalizes with us after his first few fights that “maybe self-improvement isn’t the answer. Tyler never knew his father [imagine that]. Maybe self-destruction is the answer.” Later, *first person* rationalizes with us further in saying that “I’m nowhere near hitting the bottom, yet. And if I don’t fall all the way, I can’t be saved. Jesus did it with his crucifixion thing.... This isn’t just a weekend retreat. I should run from self-improvement, and I should be running toward disaster.... ‘If you lose your nerve before you hit the bottom,’ Tyler says, ‘you’ll never really succeed.’ Only after disaster can we be resurrected” (Palahniuk 70). This life lesson can be explained when we take a look at the writings of Richard Hilbert in his understandings for chronic pain. Pain in many ways is a subculture. Culture tells us how to identify and define pain, but when the pain becomes too much, too overwhelming, we look for extrinsic ways to cope with it. The key to this process is social interaction (365). Fight club is just that. Like the Church or any other organization, support group, what have you, it is through others that we learn to cope with our pain. Tyler emerges from the narrator as the motivating force for this expression of inner pain. Without Tyler, the *first person* would continue to go about his daily affairs, living in his condo filled with commercial commodities, surrounded and alone with things he doesn’t need. Like the deeply repressed feelings of abandonment and displacement, Tyler comes forth into *first person’s* world, serving as the expression he needs to cope with his inner pain, his spiritual pain, and it is through Tyler that he bonds with other men who are feeling the same way. Fight club represents the social interaction these men otherwise do not have. It is their coping mechanism.

Fighting is what helps to actualize this spiritual pain, to bring it to the surface. Otherwise, it stays cooped up inside, repressed, like the notion of being fatherless. These men who take part in Fight Club are searching for something meaningful, something more than the lifeless houses they surround themselves with: “I wasn’t the only slave to my nesting instinct. The people I know who used to sit in the bathroom with pornography, now they sit in the bathroom with their IKEA furniture catalogue” (Palahniuk 43). The doorman of *first person’s* complex tells us after we finish reading about our narrator’s apartment being blown up, “if you don’t know what you want, you end up with a lot you don’t” (46). Fight Club and Project Mayhem are simply the means of taking back control of their lives, to break away from the routine and materialism that would otherwise confine them, to help them truly feel alive. To be

resurrected.

And, this is what boot camp did for me. It gave me control of my life. I would not be where I am today had I not experienced similar feelings at that point in my life. I wouldn't go so far as to say that I felt repressed or abandoned. I have rather fond memories of my childhood, and my father was always there whenever my sister or I needed him. Instead, I believe it lies more in the fact that I needed more control over my life. I needed to feel like I was doing something for myself. The military enabled me to find a sense of myself, much in the same way fight club enabled *first person* to get a better grip over his own inner turmoil and spiritual anguish. Fight club is as much about brotherhood and bonding as the military is, what with its camaraderie and unit cohesion. While the book is extremely pessimistic in its approach to conveying this deeply rooted observation about men in turn-of-the-century society, even embellishing the details about male angst to a large degree, I believe it conveys the feelings all young men go through at a period in their lives: striving to find a sense of themselves. We do this by relating to others.

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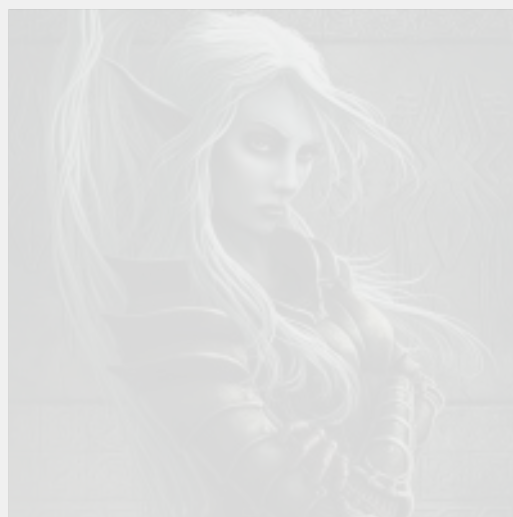
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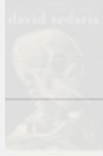
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