

AN EPILOGUE

The Somewhat Visible Man

CHUCK KLOSTERMAN

I've spent two hours trying to create a levelheaded opening for this epilogue, but nothing I've pretended to write reflects my feelings about this book in any meaningful or accurate way. As such, I'm just going to skip the manufactured introduction and cut straight to the part that matters.

Here is my problem:

This is a book that's almost entirely about me. It's difficult to accept that notion, but what other conclusion can I draw? The title has my fucking name in it. Even when the various writers attempt to investigate unrelated ideas and seemingly disconnected problems, they've been forced to utilize specific things I've written as a means for reaching whatever point they intend to address. The whole concept is built on that conceit. Yet as I read these essays, almost everything feels unfamiliar and alien (including, oddly, the recontextualized excerpts from my own books). It's like watching a documentary about oneself without recognizing the cast; I suppose it's a little like watching a documentary about someone who looks like me and has the same name, but whom I've never met or spent much time thinking about. Moreover, the writers of this book seem to have anticipated my reaction, which leads me to believe my response is almost comically predictable.

So how am I supposed to react to this?

Certainly, I know how I *should* react: I should be extremely flattered, and I should make a lot of self-deprecating statements about how this whole idea is crazy and perverse and undeserved. And if I did that, I wouldn't be lying: I am

extremely flattered by this, and I think the whole concept is nutzo. These are some of the nicest things ever written about me, many of the contributors are clearly better informed about the history of ideas than I am, and being compared to dead geniuses is a wonderful feeling (even when those comparisons are inaccurate). But what good would it do to express those thoughts? No matter how I did it, they'd come across as unoriginal and disingenuous. It's not like this book was some kind of ambush—Seth Vannatta came to me in early 2010 and said it was a project he wanted to pursue, and I said, "Go for it." I've had a long time to think about what this is supposed to mean. I should either strongly defend the existence of this manuscript or openly ridicule it. But I can't do either of those things. And that's not because I don't understand this book; it's because I do.

So that, I guess, is my problem: I understand why this book exists.

This book exists because someone might buy it. More specifically, this book exists because the kind of someone *who never buys books about philosophy* might buy this one, for motives totally unrelated to philosophical inquiry. I'm not authentically famous, but I'm "famous enough." Every person involved with this transaction (both tangibly and intangibly) understands these circumstances. As I skim the assortment of essays in this anthology, I recognize that most of the examples cited come from *Sex, Drugs and Cocoa Puffs*, the least logical, most self-consciously contradictory book I've ever produced. But that book is also (by far) the most popular thing I've ever published, which makes those particular thoughts more valuable to other people. I think about this all the time. If I had known how many people were going to read that book, I could never have written it.

That makes me feel good and bad.

There's a section in this anthology where Sybil Priebe mocks the idea of a religion based around my persona.¹ This is just a metaphor, of course, and not really about me at all. But

¹ This is not really accurate, I suppose. This essay—which is pretty funny, actually—is really about the arbitrary orthodoxy of religion, and my name is just the placeholder for whatever people need to believe. But this is a weird thing to hold the place of.

my name is attached, so my perspective is skewed. It seems like a commentary on something I accidentally proposed. And it distracts me, particularly since (a.) no such religion exists, and (b.) no one in the world thinks that it should. It's like she's satirizing an idea that no one has had except herself. But I understand why this happens (or at least I think I do). She's trying to be entertaining, which is totally reasonable. As a commercial writer, it's something I never stop worrying about.² I only have three goals when I write anything: to be entertaining, to be interesting, and to be clear. But at the same time, I exclusively enjoy writing about big, unwieldy ideas—nothing else seems worthwhile (to me, unsolvable ideas are always the most intriguing). So this is where a degree of dissonance inevitably derives: I'm trying to write fun, entertaining books about complex ideas, but the ultimate product is typically consumed by individuals who only want $\frac{1}{2}$ of that equation.³ They either *just* want to be entertained (without having to “examine” anything), or they *only* want to dwell on the ideas (and are thus annoyed by the flippant, comedic techniques that undercut the gravity of the central message).

I suppose this chasm is intentional, although I'd be lying if I claimed to understand why that intent is important to me. I only know that it is.

Someone (possibly Jerry Seinfeld, but probably a lot of people) once argued that comedy is like math proofs: If $A = B$ and $B = C$, then $A = C$ (and that's the joke, because it never does). I do this all the time, and that makes for flawed philosophy. But that doesn't bother me. I'm not trying to *convince* people how to think or what to feel. Nobody believes me when I say that, but it's true. Why would I want the entire world to think like me? What kind of twisted person wants to impose their personal view of reality onto complete strangers? I'll never understand that impulse. To me, writing is the most specifically personal thing I do. I enjoy the process of arguing, but I have no end

² Even as I write this epilogue, I find myself worrying that it's not funny enough to publish—despite the fact that there's no reason for there to be any jokes here whatsoever. In fact, some readers would probably prefer there not be.

³ This dichotomy generally excludes heavy drug users—they always want both.

game in mind; to me, it's just pleasurable and engaging and more worthwhile than making small talk.⁴ I want conservative people to perceive me as liberal and I want liberals to perceive me as conservative—that's pretty much the comprehensive template of my political aspirations. I feel the same way about arts criticism: I love KISS and Billy Joel, but why would I care if people who aren't me think they suck? I'm sure they have their reasons.

This is not to say I don't have feelings, because I do. I don't fake love or distaste.⁵ I dislike soccer, and I certainly hate the culture *around* soccer (or at least how that culture manifests itself in America). I'm very adept at making fun of it. As a result, I will always be loathed by a certain type of US soccer fan who feels like I consciously attack his (or her) self-identity. They'll never get over it, and they'll always take it personally. They assume my motive for writing a satirical essay about soccer must be the same as whatever their motive would be for seriously advocating its greatness. It becomes the prism for how they interpret everything else I do, and that marginalizes me. But this is not something I can complain about it, because I'm (unconsciously, but also vividly) doing it on purpose.

There's a great moment in Ian MacDonald's book about the Beatles' song catalogue (*Revolution in the Head*) where he mentions how John Lennon accidentally sang the wrong lyrics during the recording of "You've Got to Hide Your Love Away": Instead of going back in the studio to fix the error, Lennon decided to leave the mistake on the album, sardonically saying, "Leave that in, the pseuds will love it." This, obviously, makes Lennon seem cool and laidback and self-aware. But—as

⁴ In general, I prefer the experience of having *my* mind changed, as opposed to the experience of changing the mind of someone else. And you know what I *really* like? I like discovering authentically new ways to think about classic problems, even if those new ways are insane and temporary and broken.

⁵ When I was just starting out as a critic in the '90s, I probably *did* fake these things, at least on occasion. It's normal for critics to amplify their feelings in order to come across as more urgent and intense and engaged, and I still see this quality (all the time) in other writers. But my ability to so easily notice this is why I stopped doing it: To me, there's nothing cheaper and more transparent than fabricated indignation (or, for that matter, fabricated adoration). I feel like readers can see through that immediately.

McDonald later explains—if you consistently create art that’s willfully misleading, you can’t really complain when someone decides “Helter Skelter” is about a California race war. A great philosopher is supposed to be trustworthy and consistent. That’s part of the responsibility. And I’m not a reliable narrator. I’m not even sure how I could be, because I’m not a reliable person.

People ask me a lot of weird questions about my books. However, nobody ever asks me the straightforward question of why I wrote them, perhaps because that question is *so* straightforward that it seems unmanageable (plus, getting an answer would stop the questioner from being able to believe whatever he wants about my motives). But here is my response to that unasked query: I wrote *Fargo Rock City* because it was the book I’d always longed to read, yet couldn’t find in stores (also, I wanted to know if writing a book was something I could actually accomplish). I wrote *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs* because I believed there were at least ten thousand people in America who wanted to think critically about whatever art happened to shape their life, and I will always believe how you think about that art matters far more than whatever it actually is (also, I was paid \$40,000, which was more money than I’d ever seen in my entire life). I wrote *Killing Yourself to Live* because I wanted to write about the things in my life that I loved the most (and also because it happened). I wrote *Downtown Owl* because I wanted to write about people I knew, but who didn’t actually exist. I wrote *Eating the Dinosaur* because I believe the media is exponentially changing the experience of being alive, and I wrote *The Visible Man* for the same reason I wrote *Eating the Dinosaur* (and also because I liked the fictional premise and there was no nonfictional way to handle it). I suppose one could argue that all my books are really one big book (released incrementally), and that the theme of this 1,500-page volume is the irresolvable difference between what’s defined as “real” and what constitutes “reality.” If someone made that assertion, I wouldn’t disagree.⁶ In fact, I’d be very happy if somebody argued that, although I don’t know why. I suspect I’m more self-aware

⁶ And this point is made quite often throughout this book, which is a big reason I appreciate it. I think my favorite chapter is probably the one on media ecology, much of which I can’t contradict (except for the writer’s notion that the problem of authenticity has essentially been “solved”—that strikes

than the average person, but I'm certain I have no sense of self. I don't even know if I would enjoy my own books, had someone else written them. And I'll never know the answer to that question. I'll never, ever know.

But that's my problem. Not yours.

me as dangerous and totally backwards). Semi-interesting sidenote: Until very recently, my knowledge about Marshall McLuhan was pretty cursory (I remember discussing him during college, but not very often). But then I read a short biography of McLuhan by Douglas Coupland, and I found myself relating to McLuhan in an intense, personal manner. What's really amazing is how often "my" ideas about media precisely mirror things McLuhan had already noted fifty years ago, even though I had never touched most of the books where McLuhan originally made those points. This means that McLuhan's arcane ideas have become so central to our collective understanding of mass media that they can now be absorbed by accident, without even trying. They are now totally normative to anyone who tries to think about media on their own. Could there be a better definition of successful culture writing?