

## The Palahniuk Method

Chuck Palahniuk, besides having one of the hardest to pronounce surnames in American fiction, has a style that is all his own. Just as some musicians can be identified by their individual sound and method of play, one of Palahniuk's books can be recognized by reading a single random page. It's worked for him so far, he's a bestselling author who had already had a work turned into major motion picture, but it begs the question for those of us who wish to share similar success: What's his secret?

Palahniuk's work follows a particular format and style, which is part of why his work is not only identifiable, but might also help explain why it's so popular. In his novel Fight Club the character Tyler Durden says what has become an almost notorious set of lines, "The first rule of fight club is you never talk about fight club," the list continuing from there (48). Ironically, the use of rule listing is an apt way to describe Palahniuk's style of writing itself.

The first rule of writing like Chuck Palahniuk is: Start at the end and build from there. Now the old cliché that rules are made to be broken is fitting here because not all of his works fit this mold, notably Choke, but that's about it. Fight Club starts with the main character, Jack, with a gun in his mouth. He is on the top floor of a building that's about to explode. The person holding the gun is the aforementioned Tyler Durden. From

that first chapter we travel back in time to find out just how Jack got in league with this Durden guy, and why a bunch of buildings in downtown Miami are about to explode.

A similar situation starts off Survivor, Palahniuk's take on America's obsession with doomsday cults. The novel begins with the hero, Tender Branson, alone on a plane he has hijacked and is about to crash into the Australian outback. The reader is told specifically that from there we're going to travel back and hear Tender's story, so we can understand why he's about to commit suicide by flying a plane into the ground.

Invisible Monsters blasts off with a scene from a wedding. The bride's hair and dress are burnt off, someone is shot and dying, and two women are fighting over a gun. Once again Chapter Two is the actual, chronological beginning, while the rest of the book builds back up to the foreshadowed climax in Chapter One.

The second rule of writing like Chuck: Start big. It's a good idea to hit the ground running in any literary work, a lesson Palahniuk has taken to heart. He always grabs the readers' attention in the first few lines. Who could read about a plane about to be kamikazed into the ground and not want to know the whole story?

Rule three: Employ lists of factoids to make the work seem more realistic. Not all of the information given out in his books is 100% accurate, but Palahniuk has harnessed the use of what is basically useless information to make his characters and their environments seem more interesting and alive. In Fight Club we learn, "To make napalm mix two parts gasoline and one part orange juice concentrate" (13). We're also told in this novel how to make a homemade gun silencer, homemade dynamite (albeit with a crucial cooking steps left out) and soap. In Choke the reader is taught how to remove a large collection of ear wax using notebook paper and a lighter. Survivor explains what is

needed to re-plaster small and large caliber bullet holes in a wall, how to remove blood stains from a fine suit, and the proper method for eating a lobster.

This isn't to say the information is random. All the fun and bizarre things a reader learns in each novel are particularly fit to the type of knowledge the main character would have. Of course Jack in Fight Club would know how to make napalm—he's the leader of a domestic terrorist group. Tender in Survivor is a housekeeper who just so happens to work in houses that are not only dysfunctional, but apparently ultra-violent, so it makes sense that he would know the tricks to cleaning up blood from underneath fingernails.

Through the use of educational aids Palahniuk not only makes his work and characters come off as authentic, but he also engages the reader on a level few other novelists can, since his work has real world application. A consumer picking up one of his works knows that they're not only going to get an entertaining narrative, but a veritable Boy Scout's manual on mischief and mayhem.

Number four: The hero's occupation must be as oddball and outlandish as possible. Survivor's main character has the seemingly mundane job of cleaning houses for a living, but these houses are not only constant scenes of violence, but he runs also a suicide hotline from his home. Jack of Fight Club, thanks to his insomnia, is a waiter, a fatal crash analyst for a major car company, and a film projectionist at a local theatre where he splices porn into family films. He also makes homemade soap. In Choke the main character is a med school dropout who works at a Renaissance Fair and makes extra money by pretending he is choking on food, so strangers will save his life. These strangers send him money in birthday cards because after saving his life they feel like

he's a child they never had. The heroine of Invisible Monsters goes on real estate tours to steal pills from the medicine cabinets in the homes she's walking through.

The fifth and final rule: Tell the story from a first person point of view.

The fifth rule, when combined with all the others, creates the biggest weakness in Palahniuk's writing. Because his books share so much ground structurally, and because Palahniuk's voice is so strong in everything he writes, it can be difficult to differentiate a narrator in one story from the narrator in another. The scene in Fight Club, when Tyler Durden and some of his Project Mayhem cohorts assault a police commissioner to make sure that their boxing club isn't shut down, is a good example. "Remember this," Tyler tells him, "we're everyone you depend on. We're the people who do your laundry and cook your food and serve your dinner. We make your bed. We guard you while you sleep" (166).

Compare that to the narrator in Choke describing to the reader the kind of people who finds themselves in a twelve step program for sex addiction. "These are people you shake hands with... They serve you coffee. These mythological creatures tear your ticket stub. They cash your paycheck. They put the communion wafer on your tongue" (19).

The problem isn't just that the sentences have rhythms and basic content, though they do, the problem is that Palahniuk's works are so similar in style that the narrators don't come off as flesh and blood characters when compared to one another. What Tyler Durden says could just as easily come out of Victor Mancini's mouth in Choke because there's nothing within the narration to differentiate the two characters beyond the plot.

The use of fact listing doesn't help. To quote from Fight Club: "To make a silencer, just drill holes in the barrel of a gun" (11), and on toppling buildings with

homemade explosives, “you have to tamp it good and tight to make sure the blast goes against the column” (13).

Compare this with another of Palahniuk’s novels, Survivor: “To get blood off of piano keys, polish them with talcum powder or powdered milk” (269). A good way of shoplifting, we’re told, is to buy a can of paint, “Then loosen the lid and drop something expensive inside. The metal of the can blocks the x-rays from the security system” (210). The “how to” information from these books are from different areas of study, but it’s so similar in delivery that it’s hard to imagine that their not coming from exactly the same person, that person being Chuck Palahniuk.

His voice is so pervasive in his novels that the protagonists, when compared to one another, come off more like caricatures delivering to us whatever Palahniuk has in store, as opposed to flesh and blood characters. It wouldn’t be an issue if most people only read one or two of his books, but Palahniuk’s cult-like readership makes it a crucial imperfection.

None of this is to bash Palahniuk’s method and style, he’s a breath of fresh air in the literary world, but it’s a flaw that authors wishing to borrow from his work would be wise to avoid. For instance if some of his books were written in a close third person perspective instead of first, the across the board similarity in narrative voice wouldn’t be an issue because there would be an obvious line of demarcation between the author and the main character.

It should also be noted that I’m not familiar with all of Palahniuk’s work, Haunted and Diary may be different and it appears in his latest, Rant, that he has become aware of this issue. Rant’s use of multiple first person viewpoints works not only amazingly well,

but each voice reads as a very unique perspective. It's a success that is only further proof that Palahniuk is not only a literary force to reckon with, but that he's capable of growth and change, a tool no good writer can do without.

Works Cited

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