Teaching Palahniuk

The Treasures of Transgression in the Age of Trump and Beyond

Edited by
Christopher Burlingame
Mount Aloysius College

Series in Literary Studies

VERNON PRESS

www.vernonpress.com

In the Americas:
Vernon Press
1000 N West Street, Suite 1200
Wilmington, Delaware, 19801
United States

In the rest of the world:
Vernon Press
C/Sancti Espiritu 17,
Malaga, 29006
Spain

Series in Literary Studies

Library of Congress Control Number: 2022930201

ISBN: 978-1-64889-281-3

Cover design by Vernon Press. Cover image designed by starline / Freepik.

Table of contents

Introduction: Trash, Treasure, Transgression and Teaching Chuck Palahniuk

Christopher Burlingame

Mount Aloysius College

It started in a small session at the 2018 Northeast Modern Languages Association (NeMLA) Convention in Pittsburgh. I showed up to present on a roundtable titled "Chuck Palahniuk: Literature or Trash" in the dreaded Sunday, 8:30 a.m. timeslot. I wasn't expecting much, maybe a few hung over stragglers and a couple of Palahniuk fanboys and fangirls, but I left stimulated and energized by the possibilities of everything I had not considered or expected.

After saying goodbye to a few friends who had come in for the conference, I couldn't bring myself to stop thinking about the session and my co-presenters. So, before I headed out to my car for the drive home, I claimed a small table in the lobby of the Omni William Penn Hotel and pulled out my laptop. I fired off an email to the roundtable's chair, Eyal Handelsman (now Handelsman Katz) and thanked him for the session. I asked if he'd be interested in working with me to put together a book proposal.

We started a general proposal that summer about the "treasure" rather than the "trash" of Palahniuk's work and divided the proposed books into three sections. We found the most compelling section was actually about teaching and revised the proposal to explore that underrepresented vein of research and scholarship. We didn't have enough chapters to support an edited collection, and this led to another Sunday, 8:30 a.m. session at NeMLA in 2019 titled, "Teaching Chuck Palahniuk in the Age of Trump." Eyal couldn't make the conference, and the session got re-located late Saturday night, so the panelists read to each other and an empty room. But, again, I left energized after seeing Palahniuk in a new light and understanding that his work could fulfill so many pedagogical purposes in so many different contexts.

While the impetus to create a book and share ideas rose out of part fandom, part academic interest, and part not-knowing-any-better, my recognition of the implication for using Palahniuk's work in the college and university classroom came from a more practical place. I work as a writing consultant and study skills specialist at a small liberal arts college in rural Pennsylvania.

We serve many working-class non-traditional and first-generation students, many of whom I meet with, at least initially, because they're required to bring me their first assignment in Rhetoric I, our first-year writing class. That assignment is a literacy narrative where the students are tasked with writing about their development as readers and writers. It was from reading hundreds of these narratives that I confirmed a disturbing and widespread trend among both traditional and non-traditional students: their educational experiences have made them think they *hate* reading and writing.

Many of these narratives described overly harsh teachers foisting dry, boring, and dense canon literature upon them and then telling them that they were wrong or didn't understand "the deeper meaning." The students described feeling like the beaten dead horse many of them did not actually make it to when they were assigned *Crime and Punishment*. Many described literature itself as kind of dead and lifeless and suggested that it was made more so because of how it was taught to them. Many described how the English class had made them feel dumb or "less than" because they didn't recognize *Old Man and the Sea* as a crucifixion narrative or they didn't know all the ways T.S. Eliot was alluding to ancient Greece when they were made to read *The Wasteland*. Many described how being forced to read Shakespeare crushed their spirits and how the red ink that made their essay bleed only led them to conclude that they were "no good and never would be good" at writing.

While critics of Palahniuk's work look down their nose at both his writing and his readers, with Sandra Newman writing in *The Guardian* that, "He's the sort of author who's admired by people who usually don't care for literature and scorned by people who do," his regular bestseller status and devoted fanbase suggest there is something of value in his ability to make loyal readers of those "who do not usually read fiction—and who may not read anything at all" (Keesey 3). It is this same brand of institutionalized elitism about what literature is, who writes it, who reads it, and how to teach it that was actually killing the desire to learn and read among the students I encountered. The irony is that those in academia and in the culture industries, who remain beholden to this antiquated idea of literature, literary studies and preserving tradition, are likely contributing to the crises of under-enrollment in humanities departments that result in downsizing or eliminating departments. It is arguable their own actions and approaches that provoke the need for seemingly seasonal op-eds and commentary pieces in outlets ranging from *The Chronicle* to *The Wall Street Journal* about both the death of the humanities and the dumbing down of the average citizen.

By teaching, especially literature and writing, in a way that alienates students, not only are these traditionalists endangering their present positions but also the future of their fields, more generally speaking. To go one

step further, this approach empowers those, especially on the Right, who attempt to devalue frivolous educational pursuits, like an English degree, by making it a culture war issue because they recognize the potential for more easily manipulating and exploiting those who do not possess the information or literacy skills necessary to suss out political propaganda. A dangerous consequence of this long-standing political tactic seems to have become realized in the age of Trump and beyond with hyper-polarization, alternative facts, and conspiracy theories outweighing what many would have once referred as observable facts and consensus reality, especially because many of the caricatures of Palahniuk fans line up with the attempts to paint Trump fans and the Capitol rioters as what Keesey notes as "'disenfranchised Everymen'...or 'fan boys, wild with rage, choked by love and loyalty (like Ayn Rand devotees but with tattoos and tire irons)'" (5). Even more ironic, Palahniuk's 2018 novel, *Adjustment Day,* seems to predict and pre-empt the Capitol insurrection, a topic discussed in the final chapter of this collection.

This may sound a bit sensationalist, but that is only appropriate when shifting the focus to an author who so many find easy to hate. Particularly, this volume will address ways in which Palahniuk's work could be employed to innovate everything from first-year and general education courses to advanced seminars. This volume provides examples for how to teach Palahniuk across the curriculum and offers suggestions for how it could promote the kind of critical thinking that will enable a new generation of teachers, readers, and learners to better engage students with nuance and have the potential to think more independently.

While much has been written about Palahniuk, his stylistic tics and experiments, the diminished quality of his later works, and his relationship to transgressive fiction and other postmodern literary movements, little has been written about how to actually teach his works and why teaching Palahniuk is necessary and invaluable. As mentioned above, my personal motivation in pushing forward with this collection came from recognizing a problem of disinterest and lacking motivation that I think Palahniuk's work could be essential in repairing. But, beyond studying the works themselves, I view Palahniuk's work as a kind of gateway to getting students to become more invested in their own learning by granting them access to engaging plots, characters, and ideas that are rendered in language that does not seem insurmountable but familiar and even humorous. In writing about his notorious story, "Guts," Palahniuk said, "My way of handling things is to reframe the painful and uncomfortable things and turn them into stories and make them funny" (Keesey 109).

Each chapter of this collection looks at a different context in which Palahniuk's work can be employed and to what ends. The first three chapters

deal with new and exciting ways Palahniuk's most taught, talked about and written about novel, *Fight Club,* can be used to achieve different pedagogical aims while the remaining five chapters address works outside of the early career sweet spot that has received the most critical praise and scholarly ink in works like Francisco Collado-Rodriguez' 2013 *Chuck Palahniuk: Fight Club, Invisible Monsters, Choke*. Because Palahniuk publishes a new book-length work almost every year, he should be considered a prolific American writer whose oeuvre demands constant re-visiting and updating of the scholarship about it. Even as I am writing this introduction, I am aware of the way my own chapter about what I call the *Fight Club* man-i-verse is in need of updating to account for the *Fight Club 3* graphic novel. Furthermore, while Palahniuk's potential to experiment with form, genre, and style is viewed by some as a weak point or failure, on his part, as a writer, it actually yields plenty of opportunities to integrate it into classrooms and onto syllabi, even in places where one might not expect it to fit.

Although my primary role at my institution is as academic staff, my experience as staff informs my work as an adjunct, and I have used Palahniuk's work in developmental courses, general education and introductory courses, and in upper-level creative writing and literature courses and seminars. What I've found in nearly ten years of teaching at the college level is that there is really not a time where something from Palahniuk's extensive oeuvre doesn't have the potential to promote or enhance student learning. I've also recognized the stigma surrounding Palahniuk's work, that comes from its perception as being both misogynist and sub-literary or unworthy, may inhibit one's decision to include his work. Using Palahniuk's work, especially in an environment that is more conservative or hostile to transgressive ideas, may actually endanger one's ability to continue teaching at a particular institution. Those who intend to employ and assign Palahniuk need to anticipate and be prepared to handle any potential resistance from students, other faculty, and administration; however, I hope that scholarship like the chapters found in this collection may be useful in validating and justifying his inclusion on syllabi.

In chapter one of this volume, I describe how the conceptualization of the *Fight Club* man-i-verse, a term I coined to describe the multimedia network over which the *Fight Club* story unfolds that includes the original novel and film adaptation, the video game, the graphic novel sequel (now two graphic novel sequels), a short story prequel, and wealth of scholarly literature, make it ideal for teaching students how to formulate and execute original, researched-based academic arguments. Situating and exploring the man-i-verse in an introduction to literature, general education course, and making a multi-step research process the culminating activity gave me the opportunity to address many of the skills with which students at my institution struggled

and would need en route to graduation as they prepared to write capstone papers. My chapter draws anecdotal evidence from working as a professional writing tutor with more than seven years of experience (at that point) and now, more than 15,000 individual tutoring sessions to justify my approach. In addition, I support my tactics by referencing the work of leading educational scholars like Ken Bain, James Lang, John Warner, and others as well as citing literary criticism and scholarship from Kathryn Hume, David McCracken, Douglas Keesey, Robin Mookerjee, and others. In the chapter, I also discuss student submissions and outcomes, and I offer a brief reflection on how the project has evolved to a fully digitized model and why I shifted the project away from the man-i-verse to the one created by Margaret Atwood with *The Handmaid's Tale* in order to teach an Honors section of the same class and how I might be going back to the man-i-verse in the future.

While the first chapter is dependent upon the coining of the term man-i-verse, in chapter two, Jeff Ambrose describes how coining the term *Brodentity* has enabled him to work with students in dissecting toxic masculinity and male fragility in his course. A major challenge in teaching Palahniuk is dispelling any preconceived notion that he is a misogynist whose works advocates misogyny. For Ambrose, brodentity is the intersection and culmination of many different concepts relating to masculinity and the way it interfaces with and is reinforced by advertising, especially commercials targeted at male audiences like those from SportsClips and Nugenix. Through these advertisements that can still be found on *YouTube*, the idea of male identity and more specifically brodentity as being predicated on being sport- and sex-crazed, Bob from *Fight Club* becomes an essential character for evaluation, straying from the typical scholarly analyses of the unnamed narrator and his alter-ego, Tyler Durden. Also in this chapter, Ambrose and his students consider brodentity as it is presented in the sketch comedy of *Key & Peele* in the context of *Fight Club*, #Gamergate, and *Mulan*. He concludes his discussion of teaching about brodentity with a look at "space monkeys" from Project Mayhem and the power of images to "control, manipulate, and inform" conceptions of male identity.

Chapter three serves as the concluding perspective on *Fight Club*, and offers different ways to teach it in creative writing versus literary theory and looks ahead to how a more recent entry in the Palahniuk oeuvre, *Adjustment Day* can serve as an extension of what *Fight Club* has to offer while also serving as an opportunity to introduce Critical Race Theory. Nicole Lowman considers the role of the college teacher and the student-as-consumer model that seems to have become normalized in higher education. From the beginning, Lowman explains how the accessibility of Palahniuk's work may make it the ideal vehicle for fostering critical thinking and "achieving other curricular goals" while

simultaneously providing students with material that engages them in a way more akin to general entertainment rather than dense intellectualism. For Lowman and her students, it does not have to be either entertainment or learning scenario because, with Palahniuk, one begets the next. Through sharing student journals, Lowman enters into describing how to use "Fight Club," the short story and chapter six of the novel, to provide students with a "masterclass" in character development, narrative point of view, fictional time, and figurative language. Lowman describes how her class builds up to "Fight Club" and how it is later used in creating a rubric for evaluating their mid-term short stories and short fiction, more generally. From there, Lowman addresses how *Fight Club*, the novel, can be used in a literary theory class to discuss the fundamentals of Freud's psychoanalytic theory, specifically focusing on her students' reaction to the multiple mentions of dildos, what they mean, and unpacking student reactions to the humor implicit in their appearances in the novel. The chapter concludes with Lowman highlighting the potential to expand what Palahniuk began in *Fight Club* to teaching Critical Race Theory using 2018's *Adjustment Day*. Considering that Critical Race Theory has become a hot-button issue with President Donald Trump signing an executive order banning its teaching and President Joe Biden promptly reversing that executive order, this would be a particularly timely application of a Palahniuk novel. It is yet another way that Palahniuk's work could be used to broach difficult topics with students who may be hesitant or resistant to engaging with controversial or uncomfortable subject matter.

In the fourth chapter, Rebecca Warshofsky examines and reflects on using *Rant: An Oral History of Buster Casey* with students to deconstruct norms established by the dominant culture. With *Rant*, Warshofsky and her students delve into how social norms come to exist and are often passively accepted without considering why they exist or who they serve. After a brief discussion of how Palahniuk's oeuvre, and more specifically, *Rant*, can be categorized as transgressive fiction according to frameworks provided by M. Keith Booker, Warshofsky describes how *Rant* and its cast of characters led her students to being able to re-examine "truths" that they have taken for granted. The first truth to be re-evaluated is how history and facts are actually man-made narratives that are constructed in such a way that conflicts or incongruities occur, and this can be illustrated by the inconsistencies in the narration of the multiple characters contributing to the novel's oral history framework. Furthermore, Warshofksy and her students pay special attention to the characters' treatment of how myths and myth-making of children's fairy tale figures like Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, and Tooth Fairy are used to imbue in children a firm commitment to consumer capitalist values and what Rant, the character, and his friends do to subvert the capitalist system and its implicit promotion of values that perpetuate the system. Another instance of

Palahniuk's characters transgressing socially-constructed norms that are "surreptitiously motivated by the value of consumerism" is how they co-opt the roadways and traffic system with "Party Crashing" and later, time, itself, with "Boosting Peaks." Throughout her chapter, Warshofsky cites student work and notes critical texts that are essential to frame her use of *Rant* to help students improve critical thinking in such a way that they are better prepared to "trace the lineage of a narrative through power by demonstrating the point at which that power breaks down." Warshofsky concludes that Palahniuk's *Rant*, and transgressive fiction, more broadly, could provide students, as members of society, with the tools necessary to promote potentially revolutionary changes to the status quo.

In his chapter five discussion of Palahniuk's *Lullaby*, Josh Grant-Young not only challenges conventional critical approaches to Palahniuk's work as social critique, but he offers opportunities for how students can engage with a more nuanced and multi-faceted response to the novel by considering it in the context of Trauma narratives. Grant-Young defines trauma and trauma narratives and suggests students analyze the anti-hero, Carl Streator's, behavior as a traumatic response rather than a simple critique of "our media-inundated culture." Grant-Young provides a brief discussion of the Gothic Loop and its role in horror as a genre and its prevalence in trauma narratives due to its role in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as it relates to sound being a triggering device. In the wake of trauma being perpetuated by the Gothic Loop, Grant-Young argues for how this can lead to narrative unreliability, which reinforces the premise that *Lullaby*'s protagonist is not simply critiquing society but reacting to the way it re-traumatizes him. While noise, which includes the narrative itself, is central to traumatizing Streator, Grant-Young offers both the readers and his students an analysis of the way lullabies attempt to control noise and trauma by serving as a kind of "reparative sound" and how the very premise of Palahniuk's *Lullaby* is to acknowledge the destructive potential behind this gesture. By transgressing the predominant response to Palahniuk's work as social critique Grant-Young suggests students are better able to understand the importance of both noise and silence in the novel and beyond.

My chapter six about teaching the short story, "Guts," is a post-mortem reflection on the experience of teaching, and continuing to teach, a story that provokes visceral responses such as nausea and fainting. However, I also explore how the tenuous position of an increasingly adjunctified faculty may result in valuable, controversial works like "Guts" being left off syllabi and how this could inhibit the full potential of student engagement and learning. The chapter opens with the horror and anxiety I experienced in preparing to teach "Guts" in my creative writing class. It had been more than 10 years since I read

it, but I included it on my own syllabus because of the mythos surrounding people reportedly fainting when Palahniuk read the story aloud at his promotional events. Because I teach as an adjunct at a small, Catholic liberal arts college in a rural and conservative region of central Pennsylvania, re-reading the story made me literally fear for my job because all that needs to happen for me to lose 'the privilege' of being able to teach as an adjunct in addition to my full-time academic staff position is for one student to complain to administration. As I re-read the descriptions of explicit self-mutilations that resulted from the different character's masturbatory pursuits, I realized that the lines of what one can and cannot or should and should not include, even if it provokes actual deep learning among students through discussion and the writing that results, are very different for those protected by tenure and those, like myself, who are not. I trace not only the discussion from that night, which was so intensive and informed by re-visiting the Palahniuk essay, "Not Chasing Amy," that we'd read earlier in the semester, that even in our nearly three-hour class, we did not get to any of the other assigned readings that night. But I also address why I now regularly teach the story as a part of my Honors section of Rhetoric II, our introduction to literature course in our general education requirements. Throughout the chapter, I justify my use of the story by citing critical scholarship from Keesey and McCracken as well as research on Higher Education trends and pedagogy from writers like James Lang and Rebecca Recco. The chapter is as much a deep-dive on "Guts" and teaching it as a model for creative writers as it is about the vulnerability of adjunct labor and how that vulnerability could endanger the richness of student learning.

The final two chapters consider novels that enable the authors to handle "ripped from the headlines" current events by looking back to Palahniuk novels that seem to anticipate the events with great prescience. In the seventh chapter, David McCracken addresses his most successful instance of using 2008's *Snuff* to contextualize the #MeToo movement and Stormy Daniels' exchange with President Trump in his 2019 special topics class on Dirty Realism. McCracken opens with discussion of Alyssa Milano and Waleisah Wilson's CNN op-ed calling for a #SexStrike that aligns with one represented in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*. Much like my own experience with "Guts," McCracken acknowledges that *Snuff,* a novel about the porn industry and a 600-man gangbang that ends in multiple deaths, is not for timid instructors. He suggests that it took him three times to ensure the appropriate framing with feminist theorists for it to have his desired effect with students at his small, Southern university. In addition to having students read works by Andrea Dworkin, Ariel Levy and Sheila Jeffreys, McCracken's students are eased into *Snuff* after reading stories from the collection *Make Something Up: Stories You Can't Unread*. McCracken guided his students through considering

the role of power and heteropatriarchy in sexual interactions, and this is where the Stormy Daniels/President Trump revelation, the feminist theorists and *Snuff* intersected. With the groundwork laid, McCracken asks his students to hold back their prejudices about sex and pornography as they read and discuss *Snuff*. When teaching such a potentially controversial novel, McCracken is clear about the necessity of providing students with extensive critical preparation because it enables most to consider something beyond the initial spectacle of sex and sexuality. In particular, McCracken's students tackled three key questions while synthesizing the novel with the critical theorists and the #MeToo Movement and Stormy Daniels affair: 1. Was Cassie Wright raped? 2. Is Cassie manipulated into participating in the gangbang? 3. Is Cassie redeemed at the novel's end? McCracken describes how he and his students work through these questions and highlights how 2008's *Snuff* still holds up more than ten years later because heteropatriarchal power and toxic masculinity still have yet to be resolved.

The final entry in this collection is a historical perspective on using *Adjustment Day* to help students understand and trace the deep roots of white anxiety in the American social consciousness. Andrew Burlingame opens with an epigraph of side-by-side quotations from both Donald Trump and Benjamin Franklin that seem to echo one another in their vilification of an immigrating other. While some attribute the January 6, 2021 siege on the Capitol as being a culmination of Trump's persistent stoking of nationalist, white identity politics, history has painted a rosier picture of Franklin as a kind of benevolent founding father. However, after showing some of the parallels between the coup in *Adjustment Day* and the January 6, 2021 insurrection at the Capitol, Burlingame illustrates the "long history of racism, nativism, religious intolerance, and the persecution and scapegoating of the 'other' by the dominant white class in America." Burlingame suggests looking at the contemporary rise of white nationalism, and the call by leaders of the alt-right, like Richard Spencer, to form an ethno-state, are critiqued and mocked by Palahniuk in *Adjustment Day* with Caucasia devolving into chaos. Burlingame shows, generation-by-generation, dating from the colonial period to the present, how the once marginalized group will adopt the tactics of their oppressors in order to assimilate and be considered white Americans, while the dominant white class will only accept the formerly scapegoated "other" once a new "other" poses a greater risk to the illusion of a white American identity to which they cling. Palahniuk is quick to point out the flimsiness of this approach, and Burlingame suggests how fiction, like *Adjustment Day*, may fit well in history and political science classes due to its potential for disarming student apprehension to any historical narrative and evidence that seeks to revise or complicate the narrative of American progress and exceptionalism in which most of them have been educated. The students may

say, "it's just fiction," so they'll be less likely to grow defensive; however, Burlingame argues that the absurdity of the white ethno-state of Caucasia in *Adjustment Day* may serve as a bridge to getting students to more fully consider the historical implications of white anxiety and nativism as well as the current danger they pose in a post-Trump-presidency America that cannot seem to free itself from the ideas he purported, in part because, like his slogan, "Make America Great Again," it was all plagiarized from the bigots that came before him.

This collection owes a great deal of gratitude to Eyal Handelsman Katz for organizing the first NeMLA roundtable and to the teachers and scholars in the collection who are finding innovative ways to bring the validation to Palahniuk's work that it deserves by making it a necessary part of the academic discourse. Palahniuk will continue to publish and experiment by pushing boundaries of form and content, and teachers need to be ready to promote student engagement and learning by bringing them into the fold. One point that working on this collection has led me to realize is that with the works beyond the critically acclaimed big three—*Fight Club, Choke,* and *Invisible Monsters*—Palahniuk is being punished for his attempts to innovate, and this criticism of his imitations of literary forms and experiments with genre seems antithetical to the creation of unique art. A common trope in the literary critics' responses to his work is to fixate on the spectacle and refer to Palahniuk's writing as misogynistic, sophomoric and sub-literary, but what seems to have been overlooked and demands to be incorporated into classrooms around the world is his deep knowledge of and deference to literary traditions. If his readers are the type of people who don't usually read or value literature, isn't a work like *Haunted,* which is structured like classic works of literature like *The Decameron* and *The Canterbury Tales,* not a gateway for these mouth-breathing heathens to find their way to "L" Literature? Aren't works like *Snuff* or *Adjustment Day* or *Rant* a great way for people who may have been conditioned to not question hetero-patriarchal consumer capitalism an opportunity to re-assess their own values and their role in society? As a nation, we cannot claim to value freedom, liberty, justice and critical thinking but not champion works that help people develop the skills and agency to exercise those values. While Palahniuk may not be a part of the canon, he should be. It is my hope, and the hope of this collection's contributors, that we are only scratching the surface of how Palahniuk's oeuvre can find its ways into contributing to the learning and diversification of ideas in higher education.

Chapter 1

Making it New: Teaching Multimedia Research through the Man-i-Verse

Christopher Burlingame

Mount Aloysius College

Abstract: Working at small liberal arts college with a large population of students enrolled in professional programs like nursing, medical imaging, and criminology, a constant challenge faced in general education courses like Rhetoric II (Introduction to Literature) is resistance from students who do not see the value of being made to take these courses. When given the opportunity to teach Rhetoric II, I joined together my personal and academic interests in Chuck Palahniuk and my awareness of the student needs in developing research and writing skills to graduate in an ever-evolving market. In 2015 and 2016, Palahniuk's release of the short story, "Expedition," and a graphic novel sequel, *Fight Club 2*, expanded the *Fight Club* man-i-verse and created new footholds for scholars attempting to enter the academic discourse around his most researched work. Because the man-i-verse spans so many different media, it poses both a challenge and a rich opportunity, especially for a novice researcher, to develop the skills necessary to be able to approach, formulate and execute an original claim, something that is in-demand across all disciplines. By making my culminating project for Rhetoric II an open-ended research assignment where students have to survey the extant literature and formulate a new, original argument on the *Fight Club* man-i-verse, I have found a way to help them gain a deeper appreciation of literature by using it as a scaffolding from which they can leap into the academic discourse and come out with transferable skills.

Keywords: Fight Club, Chuck Palahniuk, Man-i-Verse, Research, Multimedia

***

They stood waiting, three-in-a-row, each holding a single sheet of copy paper. Without a word, the first student handed me her paper. Below the MLA heading where the title should have been it said, "The first rule of fight club is you don't talk about fight club." She stepped aside, and the student behind her stepped forward extending a nearly identical single leaf of paper, "The second rule of fight club is you don't talk about fight club." She sidestepped, making way for the final student to hand me a last single sheet that said, "Only two men per fight." The three students did an about-face, returned to their single-file line and began to march back to their seats. They burst out laughing. The first woman, a nursing student—they were all nursing students—turned and said, "Sorry, we couldn't keep it together." They went back to their computers to get their actual research papers.

It was the final night of my Rhetoric II class in December 2018. At my institution, the name is misleading. Rhetoric II is actually the Introduction to Literature course in the general education sequence of core classes. I should pause to mention two things that will be significant to understanding what this is all about: 1. I work at a school that operates under the moniker of being a liberal arts college; however, our bread and butter are actually professional programs like criminology, nursing and medical imaging, meaning that in order to accommodate their clinical schedules, many of these students have to take their general education credits in the evening after spending a whole day at clinical, leading to very tired and sometimes, understandably disengaged students and 2. I am a professional writing tutor, by day, who works with students from across the curriculum, averaging more than 1,500 sessions per year, and an adjunct instructor, by night, who normally is given the developmental writing and first-year composition students. I hold an MFA in fiction writing, and I have since completed a Ph.D. in literature and criticism with a dissertation on adapting transgressive fiction. So, when I get the chance to teach literature, I treat it as a real opportunity to take my teaching to the next level by bringing in work that I love and finding new ways to challenge students who may not have a real interest or even see a need to take a class like the ones I most often teach.

As Douglas Keesey notes, Chuck Palahniuk "connects with working-class people, many of them young, who do not usually read fiction—and who may not regularly read anything at all. His writing features characters, situations, and language with which they can identify" (3). While this is true, and factored into my decision to include *Fight Club* on my syllabus, there is actually a bigger factor that I am calling the *Fight Club* man-i-verse. Similar to the increasing number of multi-verses or cinematic universes, like Marvel or DC or *Star Wars*, Palahniuk has created a world of characters that cross so many forms of media, with which students can engage, that include a short story, a

PAGES MISSING

FROM THIS FREE SAMPLE

Index

S

T

U

V

W