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That Time I Read With Chuck Palahniuk

COLUMN BY BRANDON TIETZ OCTOBER 25, 2014

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I just did a live reading with **Chuck Palahniuk**.

It still feels weird saying it, probably because after thirteen years of reading the guy's stuff...I never thought the first meeting was going to take place on stage. I figured it'd be in a bookstore or some local Q&A in which I'd be just another audience member...not on stage in front of 700+ people. Not a part of the circus.

If you want the backstory (and I'll keep it brief), the authors in Chuck's anthology *Burnt Tongues* were e-mailed about possibly performing with him while he's on tour for his new novel *Beautiful You*. Out of the twenty, four were picked, mostly due to logistical reasons: Gayle Towell, Neil Krolicki, Fred Venturini, and myself. Seattle, Boulder, NYC, and San Francisco. I got San Fran; the **DNA Lounge**. "You're going to be his opener," the email said.

Thirteen years ago I was just another kid falling in love with transgressive fiction via *Fight Club* and *Choke*. Now I was going to open for the guy who wrote it. There was always that small hope that Chuck was going to include some of his *Burnt Tongues*' authors on his tour, but it seemed to be too grand, too good to be true. And that idea

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was mentioned so many years ago that most of us had forgotten about it. Chuck didn't.

He followed through, and I got to read with one of my literary heroes. Here's how the night went down.

Pre-show:

The DNA Lounge staff got the venue ready while the people from Booksmith assembled the table display for Chuck's novels. I'm talking hundreds of copies. Huge fucking stacks. Meanwhile, I was reading and re-reading my material in one of the booths, sometimes glancing up to watch the worker bees move furniture around and adjust lights. Then Chuck walked in and everyone stopped for a moment. He spoke to the manager of the venue and a couple reps from Booksmith, more of less explaining how he wanted things set up. Everyone got back to work. Then he walked over to me and asked, "Are you Brandon?"

We briefly got acquainted and then we got down to business: him telling me how the night was going to play out. There's a proven formula for a Chuck Palahniuk reading, and he broke it down for me step-by-step: intro, candy toss, story reading, glowing beach ball rave, etc. It was a little surreal because my first conversation with the guy was him explaining how we're going to do this reading together. After the debriefing, Chuck made his rounds and starting getting prepped for the show (due to start in about an hour and a half).



The thing you have to keep in mind is that Chuck (at that point) only knew a couple things about me: my name and that I have a story in his anthology. Other than that, I was just some dude...so understandably, he was a little shy and standoffish at first because he's about to share the stage with almost a complete stranger. He's used to reading with the likes of **Monica Drake** and **Lidia Yuknavitch**...people he actually knows. Not randoms. Thinking of it from his perspective (and in hindsight), he probably wasn't expecting much out of me. At best, I'd stumble my way through a story and get

Later on, in the upstairs green room, Chuck said to me, 'The



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some polite applause. If he thought that, I wouldn't have blamed him. Writing well and performing well are two different animals. It's rare you find someone who can do both.

Later on, in the upstairs green room, Chuck said to me, "The show's sold out. Over 700 people are going to be here. You nervous?" He may or may not have been trying to gauge if I was a freezer. The truth: yes, I was nervous...my record crowd for a reading was around 100 when I did **Literary Death Match**. 700 was some next level shit. I told him, "Yeah, little bit nervous...but this is my favorite part of the job."

"Performing?" he asked. He sounded surprised by the answer.

"This is literally the only part of writing books that's going to give me an adrenaline rush. I love this shit." I sipped whiskey. Chuck cracked a smile.

We went out into the main room for a while. I hung out on the edge of the stage vaping, indulging in some liquid courage, and talking to some of the attendees while Chuck did his author thing: signing books, taking pictures, and "pressing the flesh" as he puts it. The room steadily got packed.



Every fifteen minutes or so, a rep from Booksmith would get on the mic and announce to the crowd that they everyone needs a beachball to write their names on for a game they'll be playing later. More and more people filed in and claimed their spots. After Chuck made his rounds, he and I went back up to the green room to wait. His tour manager came in to report that people were still wrapped around the block and we'd more than likely be starting late.

That's a common thing with readings: they never start on schedule. I was cool with it. Chuck and I hung out in the green room and chatted. It wasn't pure business this time. We bullshitted, we sipped our drinks, and confirmed the game plan one final time. The show was about to begin.

The Reading (part 1):

The rep from Booksmith got the crowd all hyped up for Chuck and introduced him, and when he stepped out the door...holy shit...the place went nuts. Ear-splitting nuts. It was a reading but it sounded like a goddamn rock concert.

So when the crowd finally settled, Chuck went into his opening monologue bit...a little banter, some jokes.

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Meanwhile, I was listening to this by the door upstairs in the green room, waiting to be called out. After about five minutes, he introduced me and I emerged to the rock concert treatment. As planned, Chuck and I went into what I'll call our "Halloween bit" and proceeded to toss bags of candy at the audience.

First rule of getting an audience hyped: throw free shit at them.





After the candy toss, Chuck explained the point of the beachballs to the audience: it was a raffle. By this point, everyone had blown up their ball and written their name on them. The winners would get a free leatherbound edition of *Fight Club*.

Second rule of getting an audience hyped: offer them more free shit. This is what it looked like when the lights went down.





The lights came back on and Chuck read a name off of one of the balls, then he told me to read one too. The winners would whoop with glee and Chuck's tour manager or a rep from Booksmith would deliver the prize. That's the cool thing about a Chuck reading: the first ten minutes or so is all jokes and games and prizes. It was definitely a party atmosphere.

Then Chuck got on the mic and I knew what was coming next. I started to gravitate over to the table for my stories as Chuck introduced me, coaxing the audience to beg me, "Please read us a fucking story!!!" in thunderous unison. Such a cool moment: Chuck Palahniuk giving me an intro and handing me the audience. As he and I discussed through previous emails, I had roughly fifteen minutes all to myself on the stage. Fifteen minutes to do whatever the fuck I wanted for an audience of 700+. He didn't micromanage what I read. All that he asked was that I stick to the timeframe and try to keep my stuff self-contained.

'I feel like you've been waiting your whole life for this moment.'

In front of that many people with the author of *Fight Club* watching me from stage right...that should have felt like a pressure situation, but I had prepared and rehearsed in excess over the past week and a half, and had just enough whiskey to make me feel like Superman on red Kryptonite. As my dear friend and editor Richard Thomas said, "I feel like you've been waiting your whole life for this moment."



This audience (and probably Chuck too) expected very little from me. I gave them "Carl": a short story that has been published twice (once online, once in print) that I've read live before in D.C. It's the kind of story specifically meant to be read to a crowd: easy to follow, short, funny, and just a little bit disturbing. "Carl" is about a talking cold sore who is marooned on the lip of a pilot, and he's very upset about his new living situation.

“And my Internet isn't working,” the cold sore says. “How am I supposed to do my social networking with no Internet?”

Carl has a Twitter account and a Facebook fan page. He has a Tinder profile where he goes trolling for hot young cold sores that are DTF.

“I swipe right on the skanks because those are the ones that put out,” he tells Doug.

“So I'll be needing that Internet,” the cold sore says. “And a Red Lobster to take my dates to. Yep...nothing gets these little Tinder whores wet like a \$4 glass of merlot and some cheddar biscuits.”

All the rewrites and rehearsal paid off in spades. I found my groove immediately and hooked the audience right out of the gate. Every punchline worked, sometimes to the point where I'd have to pause so they could settle down. It was the inverse of Murphy's Law at play: everything was going absolutely right. And when I delivered my final lines of "Carl" I was rewarded with thunderous applause like nothing I'd ever heard.

I turned to take a sip of whiskey and saw Chuck and his tour manager smiling and clapping. I did one more piece, a short excerpt from my most recent book *Good Sex, Great Prayers*. Like "Carl", this too was specifically designed to be read aloud: a redneck preacher that's equal parts Fred Phelps and Ric Flair delivering a sermon about meth hookers, lot lizards, and how the Devil is in everything. It's transgressive fiction with a religious Mid-Western twist...and the audience ate it right up.

My reading concluded, and again, the audience burst into applause. Chuck walked onto the stage, shook my hand, and just barely over the noise I could hear him say, "Nice job."

The Reading (part 2):

Right after my reading, Chuck and I did another round of glowing beach ball lottery for the leatherbound editions of *Fight Club*. Then he prepared to read his material, a couple new short stories that haven't been published yet and that he was doing exclusively on the tour. I settled in on the stage-left stairs with his tour manager, and he whispered, "Great fucking job out there." I was happy; I was relieved. I was still jacked up on adrenaline from performing in front of over 700 people and giving one of the best live performances I've ever given.

Then Chuck read. It was the first time I had ever seen him read in person and not on YouTube...and I got to hang out with his tour manager while he did his thing. The pieces he did were "The Facts of Life" and "The Toad Prince".



Just as I expected, the dude is an old pro at this: polished, clean, he never fumbles. The guy knows exactly how to work an audience and hits all the right notes. It was a clinic...me, the young upstart, watching the seasoned veteran show me how it's done. Of course, both his stories go over very well and had all the traditional Chuck elements: humor, disgust, and clever one-liners. He killed it, just like we all expected him to. To finally be able to watch it happen in person was an experience almost equal to performing in front of that crowd.

When Chuck wrapped up his reading, the fun began again in the form of severed arms being tossed out to the crowd. Three boxes of them. Then he began his Q&A session in which each person that asked a question was given a copy of *Drivel* and a copy of *Burnt Tongues*.



He talked about movies (had no idea *Invisible Monsters* has failed to get made five times), women role models, and his inspiration for writing. Each question was carefully pondered and responded to, and by the end of it, every person looked happy. The guy knows how to please a crowd, and I'm thankful I got to be a part of that.

Post-Performance:

Chuck, his tour manager, and myself exited the stage to a final wave of applause and cheers. We ascended the stairs to the green room and closed the door behind us. It was over. We did it. We killed it. He reiterated how well I did out there and any shyness he previously had towards me was completely gone. For the next ten or fifteen minutes we hung out and celebrated the win. His tour manager came back with a couple copies of *Beautiful You*, one for me and one for my friend back in KC.

Inscriptions don't get any better than this: