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## A Conversation with Chuck Klosterman

### **Abstract**

Chuck Klosterman is a pop-culture savant who talks sports for *Grantland* and dispenses advice in his Ethicist column for *The New York Times Magazine*. Along the ride, he's also written for *Spin*, *Esquire*, *GQ*, *The Believer*, and *The Washington Post*. Klosterman is perhaps best known for his five books of non-fiction and essays -- *Fargo Rock City*; *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*; *Killing Yourself to Live*; *Chuck Klosterman IV*; and *Eating the Dinosaur* -- a pair of novels, *Downtown Owl* and *The Visible Man*.

In January, Klosterman visited Butler University to read from his new collection of essays, *I Wear the Black Hat: Grappling with Villains (Real and Imagined)*, for the first time. Before he stepped foot in Indy, Klosterman chatted with *Booth* contributing editor Chris Speckman on the phone about the falsification of memory, the beauty of Jimi Hendrix's mistakes, the similarities between *The Wire* and Russian literature, the idea of Dave Eggers, a legendary junior-college basketball game in North Dakota, and the dream of not hating something you've written a decade after its publication.

### **Keywords**

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June 14, 2013

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by Chris Speckman

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**Chris Speckman:** *How old were you when you began to have aspirations of being a writer? What initially drew you to reading and writing when you were younger?*

**Chuck Klosterman:** When I was a kid in elementary and middle school, I was maybe

more interested in writing and reading than other kids, although not to the point where I thought, *This is what I want to do for a living*. That's not because I had some sort of apprehension or distaste or insecurity—I just didn't think of writing as a way to make a living.

I was pretty old before it occurred to me that it was a viable career. When I went to college at the University of North Dakota, I assumed that I would probably become an English teacher and a football coach or a basketball coach. Not because I had this dream of doing that, but it just seemed like something I would be good at. Then I found out that our college newspaper paid people to work at it, and it blew my mind. I figured that was way better than getting a standard job. I started writing for the newspaper, and it was just a natural thing. I felt like I was okay at it right from the get-go. I started working as an editor, and I just loved it. It was so fun. I loved the people I worked with. I realized that if I majored in journalism, at least I knew what the job was at the end. At that time, I sort of thought that working at a newspaper would be my life. I still wasn't really thinking of book writing necessarily. Eventually, I just tried to see if I could do it. I was working in Ohio, and I wanted to see if I could write a book-length manuscript.

So it was never like I had this dream, and the dream was fulfilled. It was like I fell into the dream that I did not know I was having.

**CS:** *I've heard you talk about people who have to write—people who just have that compulsion. Would you say that you're someone like that or more like someone who has simply found a career as a writer that's preferable to any alternative?*

**CK:** I do love writing. But I don't feel a compulsion to write the way some writers suggest. There isn't a great separation for me between thinking about something and writing about something. Writing about something is almost the process of working through my thoughts on it. I don't write anything that isn't published. To me, that's the difference. There are some people who seem like they would write even if no one was going to see their work. They have the need to prove it to themselves that this worldview exists. I'm not like that. If I'm not going to write about something, I'll just think about it. I don't need to share it with other people. However, I think sharing it with people is a great way to live. The process of writing is always pleasant. Maybe not always pleasant, but always engaging. The process of publishing is often not. Sometimes I hate the process of publishing. But you have to publish in order to keep writing. That's just the way it works.

**CS:** *So you've never been a person who keeps a diary or writes secret poetry or jots down lots of notes about things that are going on in your life?*

**CK:** Never.

**CS:** *But it does seem to me that you've managed to catalog a great deal of stuff that has happened to you, and it seems like these may be things that have come out later in your writing. Do you write down a lot of observations, or do you just have a really great memory?*

**CK:** Probably the latter. I think the difference between non-fiction writers—particularly essayists and memoirists—and other people is that they can't really get over the past the way that other people do. I think that's part of my problem. The things that happened to me when I was fifteen or twenty or twenty-five, I still think about, and it feels like I think of them in a very vivid, clear way. That might be a product of my falsification of my memory. Perhaps I remember things, and I'm really just talking about the way I want to remember things, then I create this memory by writing it.

**CS:** *In many ways, it seems like growing up in small-town North Dakota may have limited your exposure to pop culture growing up, at least when compared to the access that a kid who grew up in a place like New York City might have had. Do you think this contributed to your obsession with pop culture that has dominated much of your writing?*

**CK:** I think in a weird way it was definitely an advantage. If you're exposed to a thousand different bands, the process is really just wading through all that material, trying to deduce what has value and what does not. It's almost just like sort of ranking it, and then you need other people to guide you. You need the critics to tell you that bands like the Velvet Underground are important. But when you only have, say, fifty bands, you're as interested in those fifty as you would be the thousand. The amount of time and engagement you have with this small sample size is the same as if you had a huge sample size. You end up thinking about these things with probably a little more intensity.

When I was growing up, Guns N' Roses was the most interesting art in my life. I didn't have access to more interesting films. I could get books, but with those I needed to be a little bit older to be guided along. So I would think about Guns N' Roses the way I probably would have thought about something conventional high art if I had grown up in Manhattan.

**CS:** *Do you think your background in journalism and looking through other people's eyes sparked your interest in the kind of voyeurism that is the cornerstone of The Visible Man? Or do you think your natural interest in others led you to pursue journalism?*

**CK:** That's a very good question. I suppose maybe the former. I hate to say this is a problem, but I have one particular hurdle that is not specific to me only but specific to people like me—because I've done so much first-person essay writing, the assumption is that when I write anything, I'm writing about myself. So when I was deciding to start that novel, my initial idea was that I'd need a situation where the Invisible Man character talks about his life to someone directly. The obvious person would be a journalist. But I knew if I did that, everyone would assume the journalist was a stand-in for me. I just knew that would happen, so I thought to myself, *What's another situation where someone's able to lecture another person about their life?* A therapist is the other option. In a way it's even more limitless because there's the assumption that the therapist will tell no one.

So what's really happening in that book is just one really long interview. So it is in a way journalistic. If somebody said "What is *The Visible Man* about?" the obvious answer is that it's about the reality of being by yourself. But there's also a lot about the idea of interviewing and the problems of interview, but also the fact that, despite its flaws, there's no better way to understand other people than asking them direct questions.

**CS:** *So you would say that the repetition of interviewing people led you to see that?*

**CK:** Totally. But the biggest thing is that from 1991 until 2001, I was pretty much strictly a journalist, and I interviewed probably a thousand people in various ways, sometimes for big profiles, sometimes for ten minutes because I'm doing some bullshit story on a zoning law. So I'm doing interviews for ten years, and then these books come out, and all of the sudden, I was being interviewed more than I was actually interviewing. Definitely between 2005 and 2006, I was being interviewed way more often than I was interviewing people. That changed my perspective, too. I know I'm not the only person who this has happened to. But I do think that I have a relatively unique perspective on the process of interviewing because I've done so much of both sides of it.

**CS:** *In The Visible Man, the character Y— asserts that the difference between fiction and nonfiction is that "only fictional stories require an explanation. Only fictional story can't have accidents." Is this a belief that you also buy into, and, if so, have you found the process of writing novels to be more challenging and taxing than writing essays and non-fiction?*

**CK:** The answer to the second part is absolutely. It's much harder. I would say on a difficulty scale of one to ten, journalism is maybe a two, writing an essay is a four, and writing fiction is probably a nine.

And this is why. So you're doing this interview with me right now, and what would be the best thing that could happen from your perspective? It would be if I said something that made no fucking sense whatsoever, if I said something that was just crazy and a total non sequitur. Or if I was talking to you and said, "Oh, I'm looking out my window right now, and I'm seeing a murder happen." That would be great for your story, because in non-fiction, what you're looking for are things that make no sense. Those are the moments of tension in a non-fiction piece, when a subject says something unexpected or an event happens that's just a huge coincidence. But in fiction, people hate that. People are always looking for the reality of a fake world that accurately reflects their world. So you're constantly looking at these problems and saying, *What is the most reasonable thing that could happen here? What could happen here that would make somebody say, "I could totally see that happening."*

It's an interesting limitation, and it gets even harder for people who write movies and television. Take a show like *Homeland* for example. If people have issues with *Homeland*, it's always about the verisimilitude. Did something happen in this show that doesn't seem real to them? The whole thing is based off making it seem boring enough that it could happen in real life.

**CS:** *I've heard you mention in interviews that writers should first be comfortable with their own work and not worry so much about their audience. Yet, I found there are several very "meta" passages in *The Visible Man*, where concerns of the audience seem to be directly addressed, like how Victoria classifies Y—'s long-winded narratives as "astounding to the point of pretension" and how Y— points out his good fortune in finding the exact tools he needs to quickly drug Valerie. Was this meta-ness brought into the book by editors, or an impulse inside of you?*

**CK:** If people don't like my writing, one of the things that they don't like about it is that it's too self-aware. I understand that criticism because I have felt that of other people's work. But as a writer, to me, self-awareness is what I equate with thoughtfulness. It's an understanding of your own reality. So I write a book the way I would read it as a critic, which is not perfect. It would be ideal if I could separate those things out and not think of any of it. But the fact of the matter is I've been doing it like this for twenty fucking years. That's how I'm going to be. I can't read anything without sort of perceiving it the way I would as if I was reviewing it.

*Editor's note: This is an excerpt from a longer conversation between Speckman and Klosterman. The entire manuscript will appear in our next print issue, Booth 5, which will be available for order on our website in July.*

Chris Speckman earned his MFA from Butler University. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *PANK* and *Word Riot*.

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