

# Jaclyn Geier-Klein and Sharon Cebula

## **An Interview with Chuck Klosterman**

Though born in Minnesota and raised in North Dakota, Chuck Klosterman really came of age in Akron, Ohio, where he spent four years as an arts critic for the *Akron Beacon Journal* around the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Known best for his insightful and uncompromising commentary on popular culture, Klosterman is the author of eight books, including the essay collections *Sex, Drugs and Cocoa Puffs: A Low Culture Manifesto*, *Eating the Dinosaur*, and *I Wear the Black Hat*, as well as the novels *Downtown Owl* and *The Visible Man*. His debut book, *Fargo Rock City*, won the ASCAP-Deems Taylor award. You can listen to his discussion with Bill Simmons about LeBron James' return to A-town in the July 23<sup>rd</sup> podcast "The BS Report with Bill Simmons" on *Grantland* (<http://grantland.com/the-triangle/b-s-report-chuck-klosterman-6/>). Klosterman currently resides in New York City where he is the ethicist for the *New York Times Magazine*. He answered Rubbertop's interview questions via email.

1. How does your writing process differ for fiction and nonfiction projects?

A: This is a difficult question. I mean, when does “writing” start, exactly? Does it start when the writer first imagines what he wants to write, or does it start when the person sits down and literally begins typing? The technical process of writing fiction and writing nonfiction doesn't feel that different to me. Fiction takes longer, because the creative demands are more encompassing. I can write 2500 words of journalism in the time it takes to write 500 words of fiction. But it

*feels* the same to me, even if the pace is different. My honest answer to this is that I really only consider the difference when I'm asked this specific question. I know I'm supposed to act like the difference is vast and that I need to embrace a totally alien mindset when I shift from one mode to the other -- but if I said that, I would be lying. My objective is to make my fiction seem real and my nonfiction seem unreal, so I probably force everything into some comfortable middle ground between the two. But that's just a theory.

2. Your writing and interview answers often sound quite philosophical, maybe even profound. Who are some of your favorite philosophers and why?

A: If you mean "real" philosophers, I suppose Slavoj Zizek and John Rawls. But both of those answers feel kind of fake. They seem like answers a person like me is supposed to give. I think my two favorite philosophers are actually Charles M. Schulz and Bill Watterson. They were both able to distill very profound ideas into a very small space. Lemmy Kilmister might be third. The song "Cradle to the Grave" has a lot of valuable insight.

3. In an interview with Rolling Stone, you discussed a staffer at a music magazine who had asked you why *he* hated Fred Durst; you said, "I'm just one of those people that sort of imagine most of what we believe socially is made up; it's absolutely unreal." What is the meaning of life? Does it exist somewhere in the plane between Fred Durst and our imaginary societal perceptions? What do you believe has actual meaning?

A: Nobody knows the answer to this question. Nobody. And if someone thinks that he does, I would suggest ignoring everything else he says about anything.

4. "My Zombie, Myself" was a great article in the NY Times (Dec 2010) about the ways in which modern-day frustrations and mundaneness are reflected in the popularity of the zombie genre. The last lines are "This is the zombies' world, and we just live in it. But we can live better." How can we "live better"? Also, do you prefer slow zombies or fast zombies?

A: We can live better by realizing that our lives are less dependent on other people than we unconsciously assume. Of course, the consequence of that realization creates its own kind of unhappiness. But unhappiness is good for writers. It's hard to write an honest book when you're feeling good. As a general rule, the best advice I could give anyone about how to live better is, "stare at the ocean." As for zombies ... I think fast zombies seem more realistic. But zombies don't exist, so I don't know why I prefer something that isn't real to seem extra authentic on TV. There are a lot of things about zombies I don't understand. When the NYTs asked me to write an essay on zombies, my first response was, "I don't really know that much about zombies, I don't even watch THE WALKING DEAD." To which they responded, "Great. That's perfect. You're clearly the perfect person to write this article." So somehow I've reached a point in my career where not knowing about a subject makes me the ideal person to write about that subject.

5. You are now the Ethicist for *The New York Times Magazine*. Of the ethical dilemmas you've dealt with, what are some of your favorites, and why?

A: I like questions where the letter writer implies that he can't tell me what he's actually asking about.

6. What is the most "Akron" thing you remember about living in Akron, Ohio?

A: The first week I was there, I walked into a bar and looked at the juke box. There were four albums by someone named Michael Stanley. Four! I was totally confused. I momentarily thought, "Is it possible that Paul Stanley has a brother I've never heard of?" Two days later, I'm driving in my car, and the DJ on the radio identifies himself as Michael Stanley. So this person – who I'd never previously heard of, even though I was a professional rock critic – is not only making music that was (evidently) quite popular, but also controlling the airwaves. I thought, "Is this man secretly running Northeast Ohio? Does he have a relationship to organized crime?" The other thing I really remember about Akron is that it's the only place in America where it's not weird to see a low-flying blimp. In any other city, seeing a random blimp would be the strangest thing that happened all week. You'd tell everyone you know.

7. What are your thoughts and feelings about the term "rust belt"?

A: Pretty neutral. It certainly doesn't seem offensive to me. Rust never sleeps.

8. In what ways did your time in Akron influence the way you write or the subjects you choose to write about?

A: In terms of being a writer, the four years I spent in Akron were probably the most important four years of my life. I had one life in North Dakota for the first 26 years I was alive, and now I've had a second life in New York for the past 12. But that little period in-between, which retro-

spectively feels like an afterthought or an intermission, was really when everything happened. I wrote my first book in Akron, and 90 percent of the second book. It was the first time I met other people who seriously aspired to write books and wanted to get loaded and talk about writing in a non-theoretical way. It was a very focused period, where I was single and depressed and exclusively occupied with my career. I reconsidered a lot of what I thought about life and what I thought about art. I sort of accidentally re-booted my brain.

9. What is the worst piece of advice you were given as an emerging writer? (Why is it the worst?)

A: I don't think there is any stupider writing advice than, "Show don't tell." It's a meaningless aphorism that misses the point at least half the time. I mean, sure -- sometimes the best way to illustrate an idea is to show it operating in practice. But sometimes the best way to illustrate an idea is to simply tell the reader what the idea is (and to let them contextualize its practical, emotive significance). The goal of writing is to be interesting, entertaining, and clear. It doesn't matter if those goals are achieved by "showing" or by "telling." Some people are fucking great at telling readers exactly what they think. I think the main reason so many writing instructors say, "Show don't tell" is because it portends to offer a lot of guidance in the span of three words. It's inflexible and all-encompassing, so it almost seems wise.

10. If you could communicate with our readership telepathically, what questions would you pose to them? What subliminal ideas would you plant in their minds?

A: If I could communicate with your readership telepathically, I would make them wonder why they have not purchased more of my books. I would also convince them to become obsessed with Carole King's *Tapestry* album. Other than that, think whatever you want!