

Review: The Fiction of Oral Biography

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Chuck Palahniuk, *Rant. An Oral Biography of Buster Casey*. New York: Anchor Books, 2007. ISBN 978-0-307-38889-6.

History is nothing except
monsters or victims. Or witnesses.
Wallace Boyer (car salesman)

What if reality is nothing but some disease?
Rant Casey [monster, victim, witness]
on DRVR Radio Graphic Traffic

Rant is a work of fiction that, according to many critics, is not the best (but also not the worst) work of Chuck Palahniuk, an American *enfant terrible* in young literary circles. Although it is fiction, *Rant* is of interest to oral historians because it is written in the form of an oral biography. Palahniuk instructs his readers that oral history “requires interviewing a wide variety of witnesses” and that “it’s inevitable for them occasionally to contradict each other” (Author’s Note). The grunge author from Washington State did not, of course, interview any of the over fifty “contributors” whose interviews he quotes at length to reconstruct the life of Buster Landru Casey, a.k.a. Buddy or Rant. Is there anything then that oral historians can learn from 314 pages of cooked-up interview snippets? The fact that *Rant* was in its tenth paperback printing within a year of its publication, that it is considerably more popular than any ‘real-life’ oral biography, and that a movie may be in the making¹ seems to suggest that, at the very least, oral historians should take a closer look.

Within the genre of oral biography, which David King Dunaway defines as “a life narrative researched primarily through interviews,”² *Rant* falls into the sub-genre of “group memoir” - a memoir based on interviews (usually with relatives, close friends, and colleagues) about one (usually deceased) person. A group memoir presents a collage of interview excerpts that are organized by chronology and theme.³ Well-known examples include Barry Gifford and Lawrence Lee’s *Jack’s Book: An Oral Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1978) and Peter Manso’s *Mailer, His Life and Times* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984). Palahniuk himself says he was inspired by George Plimpton’s *Truman Capote: In Which Various Friends, Enemies, Acquaintances, and Detractors Recall His Turbulent Career* (New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 1997), Jean Stein’s *Edie: An American Biography* (New York:

Knopf, 1982), and Brendan Mullen's *Lexicon Devil: The Fast Times and Short Life of Darby Crash and the Germs* (Port Townsend, WA: Feral House, 2002). Interestingly, like the fictional *Rant*, these non-fictional biographies are rarely reviewed in historical journals, but quite commonly in literary magazines.⁴

The group memoir of *Rant* follows the chronology of Rant's life in order to explore the life and death of Rant Casey, but also to paint a picture of the society in which he lived, including that society's understanding of reality and history. Although it remains unclear when exactly in the future Rant lived, this "mockumentary in prose"⁵ is also about our own society. The introduction outlines the drama of the plot, told by car salesman Wallace Boyer, who met Rant's father, Chester Casey, on a plane to Rant's funeral. According to Boyer, Rant was the source of a fatal epidemic of rabies with which he had infected such a large part of the population that martial law had been declared. Watched live by a global television audience, he crashed his car and burnt to death. At least, that is how it appeared to most people.

Typical of many interviewees in this book, Boyer is astoundingly honest and reflective: "Like most people," he begins, "I didn't meet and talk to Rant Casey until after he was dead" (1). Typical of many interviewees, too, his language is beautifully descriptive, almost poetic. Here, for example, is his description of Chester's hands: "His skin, it's the same as any car wreck you can't not stare at -- dented with tooth marks, pitted and puckered, the skin on the back of his hands looks one god-awful mess" (1). Compared with real life oral biographies such as Stein's *Edie*, however, this eloquence is not unusual.

Succeeding chapters chronicle Rant's life, from his childhood and teenage years in rural Middleton (chapters 2-13), his departure to and life and death in the city (chapters 14-27) and on to various theories about his afterlife (chapters 28-41). The overall story is an entertaining, at times thought-provoking and even biting commentary on our society and culture. The role of the 'Historian' in Rant's society is so bizarre that it alone will make it a fun read for 'normal' historians.

Why did Palahniuk choose the form of oral biography to present Rant's story? The author who became famous for *Fight Club*, his first book, explains: The glory of the 'oral biography' form is how it allows the story to cut instantly from one plot thread to another, or from the 'camera' perspective of one character to another, while both describe the same event. This let me boil each statement down to the minimal plot point so that the action moves blam, blam, blam through the entire twisted life and death of Rant.⁶

It is perhaps no wonder that several of Palahniuk's books have been made into movies. This cinematic approach to oral history may be worthwhile to ponder for those thinking about ways to present the mass of interviews they have collected, be it about a person, an event, or a social process.

Does Palahniuk succeed as an oral biographer? According to Harry Russel Huebel, “[t]he inner life of the subject should be the special province of the oral biographer; he can call on his subject’s friends for expert guidance.”⁷ By this dictum, Palahniuk fails. We gain insight into the inner lives of some of the narrators, but not Rant’s. The closest we get to Rant are the words people put into his mouth. Here is a typical sequence:

Echo Lawrence (Party Crasher [and Rant’s girlfriend]): Listen up. Rant would tell people: ‘You’re a different human being to everybody you meet.’

Sometimes Rant said, ‘You only ever is in the eyes of other folks.’

If you were going to carve a quote on his grave, his favourite saying was: ‘The future you have tomorrow won’t be the same future you had yesterday.’

Shot Dunyan (Party Crasher): That’s bullshit. Rant’s favourite saying was: ‘Some people are just born human. The rest of us, we take a lifetime to get there.’

Bodie Carlyle [Childhood Friend]: I remember Rant used-to saying, ‘We won’t never be as young as we is tonight.’ (18)

Perhaps not surprisingly, we learn most here not about Rant or even the interviewees but about the author’s view of the world. A subtle reminder to be humble in our own endeavours to write about the past with the help of our interviewees.

Evident in this brief excerpt too is that Palahniuk excels at formulating witty comments on society. Most are not original but more like funny sticky notes: concise and amusing reminders of what we once read in academic books. In some cases, larger theories of culture and society are developed. Green Taylor Simms (Historian), for instance, explains in detail in his “Fieldnotes,” which are extensively quoted, how Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, and the Tooth Fairy are used to instil in children a blind belief in capitalism and the traffic system. Palahniuk sketches a society that is different from our own and yet quite similar.

At first sight, much of what the informants tell us is unbelievable and implausible. They want us to believe that Rant was a lonely country boy with a super-canine sense of smell who slowly built up his tolerance for infections by systematically getting bitten by poisonous spiders and snakes and all other kinds of animals. We are supposed to believe that in order to control traffic, state authorities divided urban society into privileged Daytimers (who could be out in public only during the day) and oppressed Nighttimers (who could be out in public only during the night). Other informants tell us that urban dwellers have plugs in the back of their necks through which they can download and re-witness other people’s experiences (through so-called neural transcripts) and upload (“outcord”) their own experiences. Downloading a transcript and thus re-

witnessing - through sight, sound, smell, taste, and feeling - another person's experience is called "boosting peaks." In a sense, it is a more radical version of oral history: the past relived not only through someone's memories captured on audio and video, but through all of the senses.

Such a dystopia (or, perhaps, utopia to some) is not only an imaginative comment on society; it also reminds us how much imagination and fiction go into our own informants' stories. We are seldom confronted, like Bruce Jackson, with the "perfect informant" who turned out to have invented his adventures as a special forces soldier in Vietnam,⁸ but more often than we may think do our interviewees tell us of experiences that they truly believed happened to them when all other evidence shows that this was not and could not have been true. They correctly remember all details of the event except for the source of this memory, which was not their experience but rather, for example, a movie:

In the 1980 presidential campaign, Ronald Reagan repeatedly told a heartbreaking story of a World War II bomber pilot who ordered his crew to bail out after his plane had been seriously damaged by an enemy hit. His young belly gunner was wounded so seriously that he was unable to evacuate the bomber. Reagan could barely hold back his tears as he uttered the pilot's heroic response: 'Never mind. We'll ride it down together.' ...this story was an almost exact duplicate of a scene in the 1944 film 'A Wing and a Prayer.' Reagan had apparently retained the facts but forgotten their source.⁹

This was not a cheap campaign trick. New neuroscience research describes this fairly common phenomenon as "source amnesia": we have a crystal-clear memory of an experience, we can see it before our eyes, in vivid pictures, but we have got the source mixed up: it is not our own experience, but rather a movie, or the photos our parents shown to us when we were young children. We can only imagine how much of our interviewees' memories is not based on their own lived experiences.

Palahniuk invented not only the interviewees and their stories, but also their voices. This is not immediately visible, because the town folk that dominate the first chapters speak in the same voice with the same linguistic quirks. Others have distinct voices. Neddy Nelson, a so-called Party Crasher, describes his experiences and expresses his opinions solely through rhetorical questions: "Can you explain how in 1968 the amateur paleontologist William Meister in Antelope Spring, Utah, split a block of shale while searching for trilobite fossils, but instead discovered the fossilized five-hundred-million-year-old footprint of a human shoe?" (7). Because we know that these are Palahniuk's voices, their constructedness is ever-present. In a sense, this is another failure of *Rant* as an oral biography: Palahniuk's authorial domination of the voice undermines what Dunaway has described as the defining characteristic of group memoir: it

“provides a democracy of sources, rather than a single authorial conclusion.”¹⁰ This presence of authorial construction may be bad from the perspectives of literature and oral biography, but it is a reminder for oral historians to pay more attention to their own construction of their interviewees’ voices as they transfer them from the tape to an article or a book.

Rant is a fast read and a compelling tale littered with quotes one feels compelled to put up on the fridge or computer screen. Perhaps, this narrative pastiche of quotes from interviews with an eclectic crew of teenage Goths, superstitious country folk, nutcase scientists, minimum-wage workers on hallucinatory drugs, and conspiracy theorists amounts to nothing more than “[a] factual historical artifact documenting a past that never happened” (Shot Dunyan, 313). Perhaps, it is a story about a future in which Historians are time travelers who rule the world. Then again, you may end up agreeing with Bodie Carlyle: “It don’t take a brain surgeon to tell, that talk’s got to be made-up lies” (313).

¹ According to <http://chuckpalahniuk.net/books/rant> (accessed 15 February 2009).

² David King Dunaway, “The Oral Biography,” *Biography* 14/3 (Summer 1991): 256-266, 256.

³ Group memoir is distinct from ‘orally sourced biography [which] relies primarily on oral sources integrated into the written record’ and the ‘oral memoir’ that is based on interviews with the main subject. *Ibid.*, 256-7.

⁴ All five books were reviewed in None of the books were reviewed in the *American Historical Review* or the *Journal of American History*. The *Oral History Review* reviewed only *Jack’s Book*: Harry Russel Huebel, “*Jack’s Book: An Oral Biography of Jack Kerouac* by Barry Gifford; Lawrence Lee,” *Oral History Review* 7 (1979): 84-5. Capote, Mailer, and Edie were reviewed in the *New York Review of Books*. None of these books were reviewed nearly as often as *Rant*.

⁵ Gerry Howard (editor), interview with Chuck Palahniuk, available online at URL <http://www.randomhouse.com/doubleday/palahniuk/rant> (click on the green glass jar to listen to the interview) (accessed 17 February 2009).

⁶ “Chuck on Rant,” available online at URL <http://chuckpalahniuk.net/books/rant> (accessed 16 February 2009).

⁷ Huebel, “*Jack’s Book*,” 85.

⁸ Bruce Jackson, “The Perfect Informant,” in *The World Observed. Reflections on the Fieldwork Process*, eds. Bruce Jackson and Edward D. Ives (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996).

⁹ Daniel L. Schacter, *Searching For Memory: The Brain, the Mind, and the Past* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 287.

¹⁰ Dunaway, “The Oral Biography,” 257.