

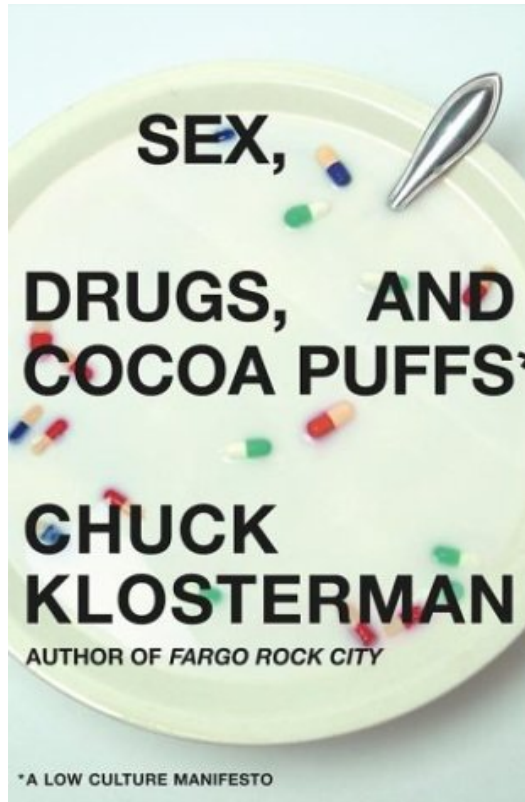
## How I Spent My Winter Vacation

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Wednesday, February 06 2008 7:00 PM -

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Paulie C is no run of the mill Indians fan. He obsesses over the team, attends a lot of games, and pens several columns a week on the team. When the season ends, he has to go into detox. He gets to know his family again, watches stations other than STO from 7 PM on every night, even gets caught up on his reading. In his latest, Paulie talks about his off-season as an Indians fan, supplying some commentary on life in general as he navigates us through it.



What seems like many moons ago, after Coco Crisp squeezed the 27th out of Game 7 in the ALCS, I made a vow to myself (after some notable brooding and [catharsis](#))

) that I would make an effort to take advantage of the time that presented itself to me in lieu of spending night after night engrossed in the Tribe. Excited by the prospect of having time on my hands, it was time to enrich myself in things not related to the Indians.

Obviously, if you've checked this site at all in the past three months, you are acutely aware that the Indians never stay far from my thought processes as I've attempted multiple times to wrap my head around c.c.ontract negotiations and what 2008 holds for our beloved Erie Warriors. But, for now, it's time for a bit of a digression from the things that are normally discussed in this space to fire up the synapses in ways that don't involve OPS, Andy Marte's batting average in the Winter Leagues, or what Jake Peavy's contract extension means to the Indians.

As another winter settled on the North Coast, delusions of grandeur set in as I

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compiled a list of things to do in the time that had previously been devoted to the Indians - read a few books on my list of "Great American Novels", fire through my Netflix queue with movies I've always wanted to see, and (most importantly) immerse myself in the development of my infant son as he navigated his way through the pitfalls of walking, new teeth, and solid foods. The last thing on the list was obviously the easiest thing to accomplish (and I won't bore you with any "you gotta see the baaaabeeeee" moments), so with Spring Training inching closer and the sports world in a deep hibernation for a while, I'll rehash that old favorite essay of mine assigned to me by the nuns of St. Margaret Mary ever September with a bit of a twist, regarding the desire to form myself into some sort of better, more well-rounded person - a Renaissance man...in three short months.

Of course, as the temperature dropped and sleep became less of a known commodity around the house, I started my "Winter Vacation" the way that so many people end up settling into...I watched TV. Sure, I dabbled in my weekly fix of SI (the final bastion of worthwhile sports coverage in the print media) but while being enthralled by the brilliance of the exploits of Michael Scott and Jack Donaghy and modestly amused by the "How I Met Your Mother" episodes, I fell into the familiar trap of watching essentially whatever was on. Regardless of how ridiculously bad network (and now cable) TV has become, I would sit and watch what Giada De Laurentiis was up to, try to decide who the hottest girl on TV is (by the way, it's Blake Lively of "Gossip Girl"...don't ask) or try to get into shows that I thought would amuse (or, at the very least, entertain me) like "Chuck" or "Life".

As I was settling back into that mindless routine that traps the best of us, watching an inordinate amount of TV in my free time...something happened. The writers guild started talking about striking and, suddenly, the talking heads in my TV were discussing what the networks would do when the TV shows that they had in the can had all been broadcast. Actual conversations about what people would watch with nothing new on TV (oh, the humanity) jarred me from my intellectual slumber.

What had happened to the Renaissance man I was striving to be?

Why had the books that had been given as Christmas gifts as my family embraced my "Great American Novels" list remained on the dining room table?

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Why was I setting up my Netflix queue to send me "Talladega Nights" and the like?

It was time to get back on track and enrich myself before they started packing the trucks for Winter Haven (which they have) and my free time would be spoken for. I started the odyssey with "Catcher in the Rye", immediately remembering how much I enjoyed reading excellent prose and how revolutionary the content of this book was at the time that it was published (though it would barely so much as raise an eyebrow if it came out tomorrow). As the pages turned, the juices started flowing again - I was watching PBS documentaries on Andrew Jackson and eschewing the offerings of "normal" TV to enjoy shows (when the TV was even on) that didn't just allow me to sit there and zone out for 30 to 60 minutes. I was rolling through the offerings of the Coen brothers, some for the first time ("Miller's Crossing"), some seemingly for the 500th time ("The Big Lebowski") while busting myths on the Discovery Channel and learning about "Lost Worlds" on the History Channel - all while sipping my gin drinks.

Quickly, "Catcher in the Rye" was done and the next book was waiting...I was on my way.

Ah, the next book. On my dresser sat the next hurdle to clear on the way to keeping my mind sharp in the off-season - the great White Whale..."Moby Dick".

Forcing myself, day after day, to read pages upon pages about what a quilt looked like or what the air smelled like, describing the minutia of every little detail started to wear me down. While the descriptions were superb and the writing was perfectly crafted as it painted a picture, I felt like the picture was being created by Monet - one, slow, meticulous, painstakingly long page at a time. Sure, the dots would all add up to a beautiful picture; but my patience and interest were waning quickly.

About a 1/3 of the way into the book (which means about 200 pages), I decided that I needed some fresh blood. Scared that if I started the "Grapes of Wrath" only to get bogged down again (essentially sabotaging the plan to finish these books), I thought that some lighter fare might whet my appetite a little more. And by "lighter fare", let me clarify that I had no intention of immersing myself in the popcorn novels of John Grisham or Clive Cussler that

entertained me in younger days.

I needed something that was well-written, but relevant...not just escapist writing to keep me interested and entertained.

Remembering how much I enjoyed &quot;A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius&quot; prior to my son's birth, I had a discussion with my friend Sara (who often travels for work and is always up on good books) because we essentially share the same taste in books. Understanding my dilemma, she asked me if I had ever read pop culture critic (if that &quot;label&quot; even works) Chuck Klosterman, whom I mainly had read through his association with ESPN and, more notably, his give-and-take with Bill Simmons from a few years ago.

Armed with a new purpose, my wife and I headed to the East Side to Joseph-Beth Booksellers (because...well, honestly because Crate & Barrel is next door and my baby loves her some C&B), debunking the myth that it is impossible to cross the Cuyahoga without a passport and proper documentation. We arrived at JB and set off to find new and exciting literary adventures...OK, that's a bit of a hard sell - we were trying to find the section that would contain books by the aforementioned Klosterman. After a bit of a search, we found his works in the &quot;Sociology&quot; section because...what category does his writing really fall under?

After perusing the titles, I settled on [&quot;Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs&quot;](#) and headed back to the West Side, ready to snuggle in for a long winter's nap full of witticisms. Reading Klosterman, it immediately became apparent that these essays I was reading about...whose topic was really nothing at all...echoed my feeling and thoughts on everything addressed. I found myself so in tune and in agreement with nearly all of his observational writings and conclusions that I realized that this book represented more than just witty observations on life and commentary on popular culture, as inane as the subjects (like an exhaustive breakdown of the cultural significance of &quot;The Real World&quot;) seemed to be.

Devouring the book, I realized that I would recommend this book to nearly ALL of my friends, as they would find humor and truth in the book as much as I did. How could a book, with no real plot or trajectory as the book evolves, be so universally true to me and (I assumed) people like me? How did it so eloquently define what I deem to be a generation of guys - my friends and otherwise, in my age bracket -

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where wit and sarcasm are valued commodities as is the ability to put into prose (or scene) the feelings that we all have and the situations that we all live through define what (and who) we read, what we watch, and how we live?

This culture of sarcasm, self-examination, and intelligently dark humor based on the dissection of life events and the people that experience them that Klosterman was capturing was (for most) created to perfection by the genius of Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David with the comedic stylings of Dennis Miller (to keep our brains tuned in to what we all learned in all of those AP English classes in High School) continued in the brilliant, sprawling works of Dave Eggers and J.R. Moehringer, leading us to the utter bliss that is "Arrested Development", "The Office", and "Extras", combined with the occasional guilty pleasures contained in "The Soup".

Chapter after chapter, I felt that the voice of the male, aged 25 to 50-something was finally defined. Suddenly, we had no need for the vapid comedies that we were told that we should like or were we forced to endure the monstrosity of a culture gone wild with no discernible outlet or social commentator. It was starting to be broken down, intelligently, openly, and (most importantly) hilariously.

For those of us somewhat obsessed by sports, the good news continues that this current of social commentary extended into a sports world that had become tired, antiquated, and essentially a contest to see who could yell the loudest. For years, the "traditional" media, like the sports department at the Plain Dealer or the likes of Chris Berman and Mike Lupica were our filter for how we should think about sports and what opinions prevailed. And these weren't even the lowest form of the "traditional" sports media, an honor tightly held by the insanity of sports talk radio. The ill-informed reactionaries that littered the airwaves spouted poorly-formed arguments and generally held their finger over the volume to drown out any logical thought. In all of the years of following sports, I have never called (or even wanted to call) any sports talk show. Really, why would anyone? The only person that I ever knew who called one of these shows was my buddy C-Badd, who once called Kenny Roda completely fed up with the mindless assertions and unoriginal thoughts that the host was piling onto the listeners. In a 15-second rant, C-Badd completely destroyed and humiliated Roda by lobbing incendiary truths on the bewildered target. How perfect was the rant? A day later, WKNR was actually airing C-Badd's 15 seconds of inflammatory remarks as an ADVERTISEMENT, followed by the WKNR voice over saying something like, "Wanna tell Kenny what you really think of him?" The episode

encapsulated everything that had become wrong with the way that sports forums were presented to their fans, talked down to and summarily dismissed by these "all-knowing" members of the media...and how the fans could truly find their voice above the din of mediocrity.

Of course as we all know, in the past few years, a funny thing has happened in the realm of sports media. A forum had been created on the Internet to become a place for people to share ideas, independent of what they were told to think or instructed what was right or wrong. Columnists like [Bill Simmons](#) emerged with his hilariously pointed (though increasingly repetitive) thoughts on the sports world and how out-of-whack it had become. Simmons cut through the white noise of sugarcoating events or creating a story where none existed as he simply wrote as a fan, with little to no access to the teams or the players that he followed. He adroitly pointed out the things that nobody, to that point, would say or write without fear of repercussion from the organization or from an individual. He called it like he saw it, in language that everybody that I knew understood and could easily relate to. Seamlessly bobbing and weaving through "The Karate Kid" or "Teen Wolf" and how it somehow related to the things that were relevant in the sports world. While Simmons paychecks still come from ESPN, it seems to remain something that he is constantly battling...that is, how to be an outsider at the center of the insider's universe in Bristol. With Simmons, a new voice in the sports world had been created, that of the fan espousing his intelligent thoughts and opinions outside of the establishment.

That movement, then, was furthered by Will Leitch, the editor of [Deadspin](#) who, despite what your overall feelings are on Deadspin, has revolutionized this new media in a way that even Simmons could never have dreamed. Leitch was the true outsider, a talented essayist (for anyone who has not yet picked up his new book

["God Save the Fan"](#), go get it now...no, seriously...now) that was played the role of sports sniper, sitting on his computer picking off the absurdity of sports and sports figures. He recognized that sports had been taken away from the fans, that it had been assumed by these giant corporations, who told us (through their substandard mouthpieces like Shannon Sharpe and John Kruk) what we were supposed to think. He pointed out that the disconnect between fans and the players that they rooted for had changed intrinsically to the point that it is unlikely that any average fan will ever be able to fully relate to the modern athlete again as the players that we root for live on a completely different plane, with a completely different set of

rules than we could ever comprehend. Conversely, he pointed out that few athletes truly care or care to relate to the fans that, ultimately, afford them their luxurious lifestyles. Sports had reached a crossroads and Leitch was ready to explain it and ultimately mock how this crossroads had emerged, one smart comment at a time.

Where is this all going?

I have no idea. Most people my age (I'm 30, by the by) don't read (much less even subscribe to) the newspaper, except for out of some perceived civic duty that we should read what's happening in our region, regardless of how slanted, underwhelming, or heavy-handed the coverage seems to be. Outside of that absurd gnawing that the local paper (or some paper) should be part of our daily routine, we seek out information sources that speak to us or stimulate our minds. Those resources are certainly not being found in what many would describe as the "traditional" media.

Has the first volley been fired in this convoluted revolution? Is the establishment of everything that we have ever assumed to be the best way of obtaining information under attack in some of sort of offensive reminiscent of Fort Sumter? I happen to think so, though perhaps I'm examining this far too closely or giving too much thought and weight to an unrelated group of isolated writers, TV shows, movies, and insights - but it seems to me that the mindset of my generation of guys is finally developing an identity and a voice. "The Greatest Generation", we are not - but, finally, we are not being asked to absorb the shallowness that we are told that we SHOULD like or being force-fed our opinions or sports by the likes of ESPN and major motion picture studios. Those corporations can't define what we think and who we are, and finally we are beginning to revolt against it, through the "new" media of the Internet and otherwise.

We are independent thinkers, quick to call out what we feel is an inaccuracy or an injustice...of course, generally relying on lobbing sarcastic insults from afar and forming our witty comebacks based on observations based in reality. While it doesn't exactly evoke memories of the "Chicago Seven" or civil disobedience, at least it's a start. Maybe we're not the idiotic slackers that we are portrayed to be, happy to plunk \$10 bucks for a Michael Bay film or just thumb through "Maxim" and play video games with our free time. Perhaps, behind all of those walls of sarcasm and feigned indifference, there is something to us...it may not be deep or earth-shattering, but I suppose it's still something.

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What the hell do I know, though, I'm just a sleep-deprived first time father that's been living in what seems like the inside of a dirty milk carton for the last few months. I'm just trying to use my "winter vacation", in the time that I don't get to see baseball on a regular basis to sort out some thoughts and didn't mean to devolve into some sociological essay. If this meandering stream of consciousness babbled a few too many times, let me be the first to ask a very important question:

How long, exactly, does it take the trucks to get to Winter Haven?