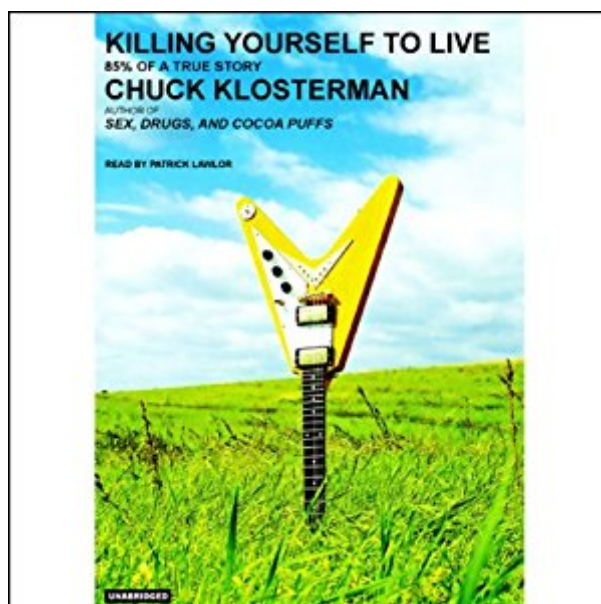


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Killing Yourself To Live: 85% Of A True Story



Synopsis

For 6,557 miles, Chuck Klosterman thought about dying. He drove a rental car from New York to Rhode Island to Georgia to Mississippi to Iowa to Minneapolis to Fargo to Seattle, and he chased death and rock 'n' roll all the way. Within the span of twenty-one days, Chuck had three relationships end—one by choice, one by chance, and one by exhaustion. He snorted cocaine in a graveyard. He walked a halfmile through a bean field. A man in Dickinson, North Dakota, explained to him why we have fewer windmills than we used to. He listened to the KISS solo albums and the Rod Stewart box set. At one point, poisonous snakes became involved. The road is hard. From the Chelsea Hotel to the swampland where Lynyrd Skynyrd's plane went down to the site where Kurt Cobain blew his head off, Chuck explored every brand of rock star demise. He wanted to know why the greatest career move any musician can make is to stop breathing. . . and what this means for the rest of us. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Chuck Klosterman's first two books were highly entertaining if sometimes exasperating melanges of pop culture and memoir. In this third book his writing is just as snappy and sharp, but there's a lack of focus that makes it several notches weaker than those. When his pop-culture addled wit and insight are aimed directly at something like '80s metal, or contemporary film, or breakfast cereals, the results can be amazing. However, he can also descend into weak or muddled rants, and when he becomes the main subject, it's just not that interesting. Unfortunately, the main subject of this third

book is largely himself and his tortured love life. The premise that Chuck's going to go an Epic road trip (on Spin magazine's dime) to tour famous American rock and roll death sites proves to be mere pretense for an extended trip into Chuck's head as he drives cross-country. Sure, he visits a lot of places where people died, like Skynyrd, VanZant, Buckley, Holly, Cobain, et al, but he rarely has anything interesting to say. Very occasionally he does, such as pointing out that Sid Vicious' inability to play the bass was what made him the perfect punk icon. The best part is probably near the beginning, when he visits the Rhode Island site of a club fire during a Great White show which killed almost a hundred people. He discovers a site of pilgrimage and reflection (and coke snorting), and embarks on an excellent diatribe against the prevalence of ironic distance in modern music fans and how the people at the Great White show were the most authentic music fans around. However, despite nice bits like these, the focus is on Chuck's current and ex-girlfriends -- which gets annoying for a number of reasons. Probably the foremost of these is how in all his writing he self-deprecatingly paints himself as an awkward music geek, and yet here he is describing these multiple smart, sexy, rockin' women he has to choose between. Poor baby. Of course he describes the rise and fall of his various relationships in relatively humorous fashion, but it still comes across like so much self-indulgent navel gazing. There are some nice parts, like an imagined fourway conversation with the women in question, and a bit where he compares each to a member of KISS that is probably pretty funny if you know anything about KISS (I don't). He's a pining romantic at heart, and as one with a somewhat similar composition, I could identify with bits and pieces, but it all gets tiresome by the end. Stylistically, the writing is what one expects. Sharp, crackling stuff, with loads of digressions, asides, tangents, obscure references, and laugh out loud parts. Music fans will have plenty of little tidbits to keep them going, such as an interpretation of Radiohead's "Kid A" as unintended soundtrack for 9/11 (rather forced in my mind), the relative popularity of Pearl Jam to Nirvana when Cobain died (misguided analysis in my mind), the "truth" of Rod Stewart's voice (somewhat better: "Stewart may be a blond clown with bad judgment, but everything he says is true"), and the universal popularity of Led Zeppelin (ridiculous: "they are the only group in the history of rock n' roll that every male rock fan seems to experience in exactly the same way"), and best of all, a moving explanation of why The Replacements make him cry. Overall, if you like his writing, you might as well read this: it's quick and there are enough good tidbits to keep you going. However, let's hope that his future books will find more focus. The only other thing I'd add is that for someone who spends a page explaining the difference between "pot people" and "coke people" (in a very funny way) and why he's a pot person, he recounts enough coke anecdotes to make you wonder about his self-classification.

"Killing Yourself to Live" is Chuck Klosterman's latest motormouth rant on popular culture and it's an entertaining, fun read. Chuck sets out in a rental car across America to visit the death sites of some famous rock stars, and to ponder why for so many of them their demise was a good career move. Chuck also tells the stories of three of his girlfriends (these may be in part or in whole fictional; at the beginning of the book Chuck warns us that "romance is 85% illusion and 15% real".) Chuck is a clever fellow so he anticipates most of the criticism that will be leveled at this book ("Why are you writing what people will call a non-fiction 'High Fidelity'?") Much of the fun comes from following Chuck's invariably self-questioning interior monologue. He captures very well how a lot of people talk to themselves, with self-doubt and self-deprecating comedy. The appeal of this book for me is how Chuck approaches heavy subjects like Death and The Meaning Of Life with just the right lightness of touch. Comedy helps you bear the unbearable, and Klosterman shouldn't be dismissed because he tells good jokes along the way. His lightness conceals some pretty profound musings, like on page 218 where he explains how his love of KISS helps him make sense of his life: "Art and love are the same thing: it's the process of seeing yourself in things that are not you. It's understanding the unreasonable." Unlike a lot of critics, Klosterman comes from the heartland and doesn't look back with disgust; the folkways of the middle of the country are bred in his bones, so he has a lot of skepticism for the enthusiasms of the elites. On page 92 he shows how a lot of intellectuals have to talk themselves into liking something like the Allman Brothers that most people who are non-rock critics simply enjoy as "just real music." Common sense is paradoxically a rare thing and I detect it in Chuck.

I've been a fan of Chuck's work for awhile and love his other books. This was my least favorite, mostly because it wasn't what I expected. From the press the book received, I expected it to be more about his visits to the death scenes, a la Sarah Vowell's "Assassination Vacation". My disappointment wasn't a product of bad writing; it was a product of bad marketing. I might reread it in a few months to see how it fares with more realistic expectations. That said, the writing could have been much better. I felt like Chuck couldn't decide if he wanted the book to be cohesive, or an essay collection. While he always has interesting observations, I felt like he phoned it in a bit with this one. It felt rough, fast, and disjointed. What was good about it? The premise, and ultimately making the point that life is a progression of change and small deaths, were both worthwhile. Chuck's writing style makes for a fun, engrossing read. Narcissistic navel-gazing? Sure. That's a given with this genre.

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