

[ PAPERBACK: US ]

## A wild ride to break a dubious record

BY LAI ANYU  
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Chuck Palahniuk is perhaps best known for his first novel, *Fight Club*, on which the cult film is based. The book certainly exhibits all of Palahniuk's best and worst traits: absurd characters, flirtations with the limits of publishable content, and a vast library of disturbing facts. Granted, the book's many recipes for homemade explosives — gasoline and frozen orange juice concentrate to make napalm, soap and nitric acid for dynamite — are duds substituted for the real thing by publishers wary of curious readers. But as the recipes aren't entirely fictitious, merely censored of a few more crucial ingredients, the explosive potential in everyday household commodities is no less thrilling.

In the same vein, *Snuff* attempts to seduce readers with many peculiar half-truths. The novel's central character, a legendary porn star aiming to set the world record for "serial fornication" on film, is a figment of Palahniuk's imagination. Its premise, the existence of such a record, is not.

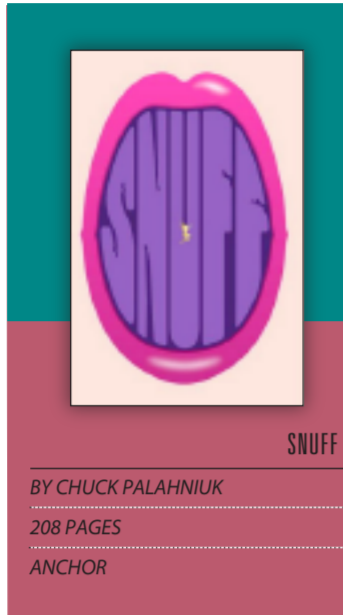
The enterprising porn queen in question, Cassie Wright, doesn't actually make an appearance until Palahniuk's predictably twisted ending. Most of the novel occurs in a waiting room where 600 nude men mill about, gorging on junk food and Viagra as they anticipate their turn with Wright. Three of them provide the narratives through which Wright's tragic past is revealed. One is responsible for forcibly launching her career as a porn star, one intends to marry her, and one fancies himself Wright's long-lost "porn baby."

It's for the sake of this porn baby, who she gave up for adoption at birth, that Cassie takes on her suicidal endeavor — which no one expects her to survive. The record-setting snuff film will make a fortune, as will her six life insurance policies.

Cassie's character is inspired by Annabel Chong, real-life former holder of the world record: 251 sex acts with about 70 men over a 10-hour period, as seen in industry hallmark *The World's Biggest Gang Bang*. Palahniuk's wouldn't be the first attempt to make something of Chong's remarkable story. But unlike other more successful works (the 1999 documentary, *Sex: The Annabel Chong Story* was nominated for a Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance film festival), his novel only superficially grazes the substance of its muse. Cassie Wright is a shallow rendition of Chong, the University of Southern California student who survived gang rape in her teens to embrace a career in pornography and challenge conventional notions of female sexuality.

It's easy to mistake inspiration badly taken for poor choice of subject matter. If *Fight Club*

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spoke to legions of disillusioned white-collar enuchs, *Snuff* addresses an equally critical if less visible sector of American culture, the porn industry.

It's a pity that Palahniuk's method is to whet the appetite without actually offering any food for thought. Who knew about the market for collectible silicone replicas of celebrity genitalia? So what?

In its tendency to exploit and rely too heavily on its shock-factor, the novel is reduced to a litany of smutty facts.

Palahniuk gratuitously resorts to exhibitions of social taboos; the plot is one big *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, rife with sexual trauma, Oedipal undertones and hints of necrophilia. The novel lacks intellectual density and abounds with dramatic clichés, but is unapologetically self-indulgent.

The bulk of the *Snuff* takes place in a waiting room, but like its occupants, readers are somewhat diverted by the oh-so-witty titles playing in the background: *The Groves of Wrath*, *Sperms of Endearment*, *Snow Falling on Peters*.

When a character attempts to commit suicide by impalement on a comatose man's electrically charged phallus, it's instinctive to respond with disdain for all that is wrong with America. But there's also humor in the absurdities of cultural apocalypse.

Palahniuk is over-the-top and full of bull, sloppily satirical and thoughtlessly vulgar — but entertaining. Of course readers are bound to be disappointed if they are looking for something along the lines of Woolf or Melville (yes, there is a feeble pun about the white whale), but even without reading the book flaps, what's to be expected from a novel by Chuck Palahniuk titled *Snuff*?

*Snuff* is a little more sophisticated than elevated literary porn. With that in mind, it's a spectacle that's interesting, erotic and, at times, enlightening. Some might even call it funny.



Alice Hoffman, author of *The Story Sisters*.

PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

SUNDAY PROFILE



*I like to write about real people in mythic ways because I see them that way.*

— Alice Hoffman, author

## Practical magic

Alice Hoffman talks about love, her latest novel and her love of the magic in literature

BY ZINTA LUNDBORG  
BLOOMBERG

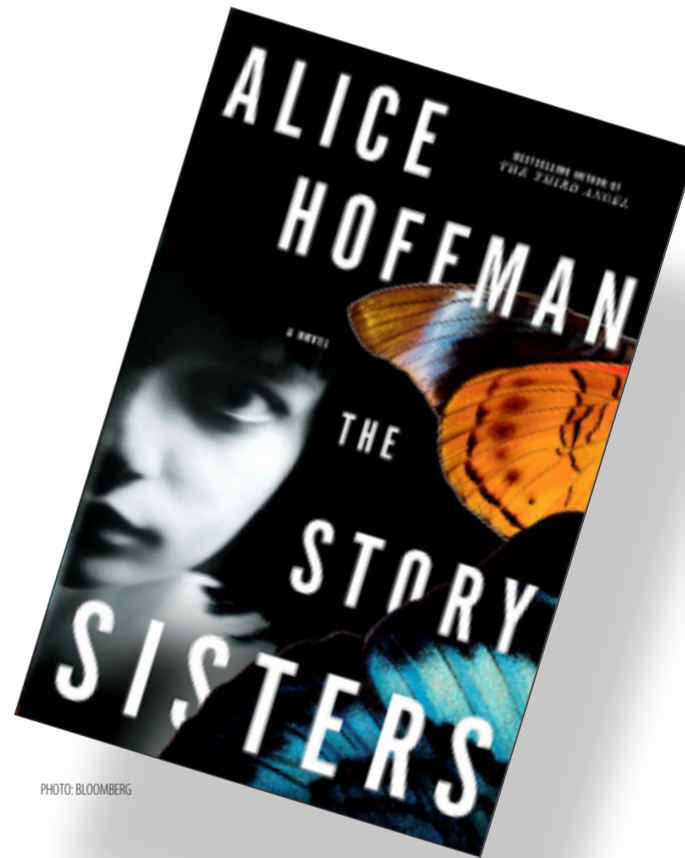


PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

Three ravishing young sisters sneak out of their family party at the Plaza Hotel. Struck with pity for an old carriage horse wearing a silly straw hat, they impulsively attempt a rescue. It swiftly ends in horror, sirens wailing, hand-sewn silk gowns soaked in blood.

So begins Alice Hoffman's latest novel, *The Story Sisters* (Shaye Areheart). The oldest, Elv, creates a parallel fantasy world for herself and her siblings, but they all seem caught in a fairy-tale curse, their young lives ravaged by rape, drug addiction, fatal ailments and tragic accidents.

Hoffman wrote her first novel, *Property Of*, at 21, while studying creative writing at Stanford University. She has become the best-selling author of 25 books, and her work has been translated into over 20 languages.

We spoke at Bloomberg global headquarters in New York.

**Zinta Lundborg: Is failed rescue one of the themes of your novel?**

**Alice Hoffman:** I really don't know what the theme of a book is when I'm writing it. I know what the story is, I know who the characters are, but the theme is something that really plays itself out in the writing.

I think it's very much about wanting to be rescued, about wanting to rescue someone, and the final realization that you really can't rescue anyone. You can only rescue yourself.

**ZL: Why does the mother know so little of her children's real lives?**

**AH:** Annie is a typical mother. I think most mothers don't have a clue as to the interior lives of their children. Those who do are very rare, and it often comes later in life. But during the time they're adolescents and young adults, I don't think we know the first thing about them.

They keep it secret from us. Partially, we don't want to know, but, partially, they don't want to tell us.

**ZL: Why are the grandmothers so strong?**

**AH:** I was very close to my grandmother. Children with grandparents are really lucky since you don't have those issues you have with your parents, and it's a freer, more loving relationship.

The two grandmother figures are like the fairy godmothers: they really understand the children and they try to set things right.

**ZL: In your book, what are the limits of love?**

**AH:** Love is all you have. There is nothing else, and that's what the characters discover.

But you can't save someone from their own fate or their own destiny or their own willfulness or the traumas that happen to them. You can love them, but you can't necessarily save them from living their lives.

**ZL: The oldest sister creates a separate reality with its own language and myths and draws the other two in. Does this ultimately help or hurt them?**

**AH:** Do stories help us work out reality, or is it a way to avoid reality? I tend to believe that stories help, and that making a narrative out of the real world is a way to understand it at a very deep level that is very hard to get to in our conscious waking lives. And that's why people tell stories and always have: whoever tells the stories creates the society.

**ZL: Why do you make animals so important in the sisters' lives?**

**AH:** There's a depth and honesty of connection, and loyalty, that's hard to find in the human world. For a lot of characters in the book, it's a salvation. They are able to understand love and then move toward the human world.

**ZL: You have pets, I gather?**

**AH:** I've had lots of animals all my life, though at the moment I have only one, a Polish sheepdog, who's anti-dog. He just wants to look out the window and be left alone.

**ZL: What's your reaction to being described as a "magical" writer?**

**AH:** I like to write about real people in mythic ways because I see them that way. The tradition of literature is magic, whether it's fairy tales or Kafka, Shakespeare or the Brontës, and the whole idea of realism is a new and not-so-interesting idea.

**ZL: What's the most memorable response you've gotten to your work?**

**AH:** I received a beautiful letter from a woman whose son was in the second tower on 9/11, and she said reading my book allowed her to feel some of the feelings she was staying away from as too scary.

**ZL: Nicole Kidman and Sandra Bullock starred in *Practical Magic*, one of your novels made into films, plus you've been a screenwriter. How has that affected your writing?**

**AH:** *Practical Magic* wasn't the book, but it's a fun Hollywood movie with six great women in it. Screenplays taught me to cut away some of the excess and think about what's really important. I collaborated with my husband since you got a lot more respect if you went in with a male partner.

**ZL: How did you meet him?**

**AH:** On a blind date. His car broke down, he wasn't wearing a coat, he'd given it to a homeless guy, and he seemed somewhat interesting.

[ PAPERBACK: UK ]

## Western hegemony's demise may not be so bad

Martin Jacques' take on China's rise, and what that means for the rest of the world, is reassuring. Too reassuring, perhaps

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON  
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This book is not the scaremongering diatribe it may sound from the title. If anything it errs on the other side, tending to be soft on abuses and highlighting China's relatively benevolent but "different" characteristics — different, that is, in the eyes of those used to Western models.

Martin Jacques is a London-based commentator on international affairs with strong links to East Asia. He writes a regular column in the *Guardian* newspaper and is a visiting fellow at the London School of Economics' Asia Research Center. What this new book offers is a survey of the present and past nature of Chinese society followed by sober and not notably pessimistic speculation on what the world might be like when China's economy overtakes that of the US, predicted by Goldman Sachs as likely to occur around 2027.

The anti-Communism so often encountered in the Western press in its dealings with China, focusing on the imprisonment of dissidents,

the extensive graft, and the lack of independence of the judiciary, is not to the fore here. Instead, you read about the continuity of Chinese civilization and the lack of aggressive overseas forays in the country's recent history, and learn that the absence of popular involvement in selecting the country's leaders is entirely traditional.

### MORE 'DEMOCRATIC'

Even on the issue of democracy Jacques isn't outspoken. Anything resembling it is unlikely to emerge for at least another two decades, he writes, and even if it does, demands for the "return" of Taiwan are likely to be even more vociferous than they are at present. Popular sentiment on the subject is more intransigent than the words heard from today's government figures, Jacques writes.

The author points out that Western states, while democratic at home, do not practice an equal representation of nations in international forums. So when China becomes the leading player, he argues, the international arena

is at least likely to feel more "democratic" than at present, if only because China's enormous population will finally be appropriately represented.

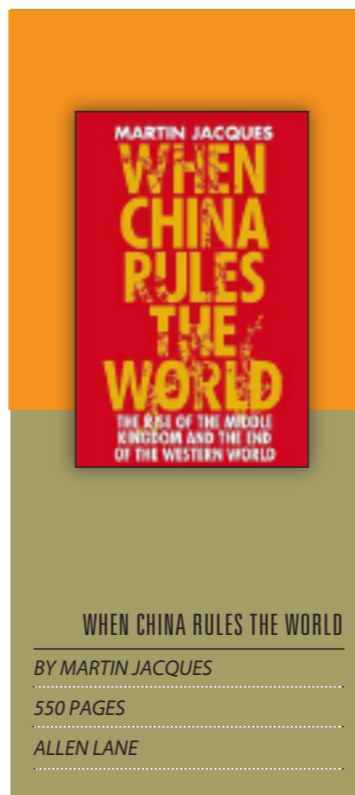
In the book's short section on Taiwan there's little to raise even the most active eyebrows. Taiwanese opinion on independence is volatile, we read, while China appears happy to leave the issue on the back burner and allow long-term trends to decide the outcome.

It would be very easy to compile a far more alarmist set of predictions. But this book sets out to soothe the jitters rather than to prompt them, even though the author doesn't specifically say this is his intention.

The text is somewhat repetitive. Jacques outlines his position, embarks on detailed analyses of China's history in compartmentalized areas, and then states his position again in greater detail.

China is the product of a history and culture that have little in common with that of the West, he insists, and contrasts it with Japan, a country that may also be deeply

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dissimilar to US or Europe, but has nonetheless done its best to emphasize its Western characteristics since at least 1945. "The underlying argument of this book," he writes, "is that China's impact on the world will be at least as great as that of the United States over the past century, probably far greater."

China's distinctiveness is initially described under four heads: it is a "civilization-state" rather than a nation-state; it believes in the intrinsic superiority of the Chinese people; it has exercised age-old dominance in East Asia, symbolized by the tributary system; and the state, in marked contrast to the divisions that characterized much of Europe, has been unified for centuries.

But by the book's end, the characteristics of modern China are listed as eight. They're now the aforementioned four, plus four more. First is the long-standing refusal of the Chinese state to share power with any other institution (the church and merchants' guilds are mentioned as having been powers-within-the-state in

Europe). Things are little different under Communism than under the emperors and "something like the mandate of Heaven still operates."

Second comes the unparalleled speed of the country's recent transformation, followed by the rule of a Communist Party that has, according to Jacques, exhibited a flexibility and pragmatism far in excess of anything the former Soviet Union ever displayed. And finally there's the fact that China is likely to combine the characteristics of a developed and a developing country for some time to come.

### US DECLINE

Jacques feels sure that US power will decline. "Its medium-term reaction is unlikely to be pretty; the world must hope it is not too ugly," he opines. Is it possible I detect a tone of anti-Americanism here, and elsewhere?

It's easy to get annoyed with this book. The author mentions, for example, that Chinese leaders have been quick to quote the conclusions of the amateur British historian Gavin Menzies that

Chinese explorers once reached American and Australian shores, without being outspoken about the fact that professional Western historians give Menzies' claims no support whatever.

It's not that Jacques is explicitly pro-China, but more that he's at pains to avoid the usual invective, and eager to display current issues against their historical and social backgrounds. This, then, is a handbook for those who will have to deal with the new China rather than a re-packaging of old complaints and stereotypes.

Even so, you have to feel that a chapter on China's judicial system would not have been out of place. It's something that doesn't bode well for human rights, now or in a China-dominated world. But human rights get little mention in this book.

Nevertheless, this is a reliable book in the areas the author opts to cover. It leans over backwards to give China its due, and this may not go down well everywhere in Taiwan. But then this is a book that's as remarkable for what it leaves out as for what it includes.