

# Explore a 'misunderstood' decade in 'The Nineties' by Chuck Klosterman

By **Chris Barsanti**  
*Star Tribune*

In Richard Linklater's movie "Dazed and Confused," a character defines their "Every Other Decade Theory": "The Fifties were boring. The Sixties rocked. The Seventies, my God, they obviously suck. So maybe the Eighties will be, like, radical." When that movie opened in 1993, the twenty-something audiences it targeted laughed knowingly: Obviously the Seventies had been cooler than the Eighties. None could conceive of thinking seriously about the decade they were living through, much less writing a book about it.

Chuck Klosterman's "The Nineties" wrestles in an entertaining and fitfully insightful way with a decade few of us feel like we understand. As the writer of an incisively snarky string of books and articles on our tangled, often-baffling connection to the American pop culture zeitgeist, Klosterman seems ideally suited to the task. Who better than the guy who wrote an entire essay on a character from echt-Nineties series "Saved by the Bell" ("Being Zack Mor-

ris") and names some of his chapters for iconic indie-rock anthems of slack ("Fighting the Battle of Who Could Care Less")?

From the start, Klosterman tries to look past the "grunge cartoon" take on the decade. This is welcome, given how often cultural chroniclers reduce periods to worn clichés. He knows that just muddling together Kurt Cobain, the O.J. Simpson trial, Biosphere 2, Boris Yeltsin, Bush v. Gore, Timothy McVeigh, "Friends" and the "Clear Craze" (Crystal Pepsi, Zima) produces no greater understanding. This is partially due to Klosterman's somewhat self-satirizing Gen-X suspicion of certainties. He is most discerning when parsing the tortured relationship his generation had in the Nineties to authenticity and popularity: Alanis Morissette "was successful because of her honesty, but anyone that successful had to be lying."

In riffing chapters whose mood toggles between jaundiced, jaunty and mournful, Klosterman tries less to uncover the true significance of the decade than to communicate how it was to experience. In turn, that leads

to explaining how different moments were viewed through or even created by the period's increasingly media-saturated environment. His passage on the Columbine massacre is devastating in showing how a false narrative of misfits-versus-popular kids derived from cheap fictional high school tropes seemed more soothing than the killings' true lack of meaning: "Television had become the way to understand everything."

Though waggish, smart and packed with ephemera on everything from Baudrillard's influence on "The Matrix" to the "calculated redness" of Billy Ray Cyrus' neck, "The Nineties" keeps turning in a downbeat direction. That cartoonishly banal period between the fall of the Soviet Union and the fall of the World Trade Center can look to some today like the calm before the storm.

Klosterman isn't trading in nostalgia for the days of "Yo! MTV Raps" and dial-up modems but he appreciates the momentousness of what the new millennium wrought: "The illusion that got shattered was the possibility of living an autonomous life, separate from the lives of others."

**CHUCK  
KLOSTERMAN**



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