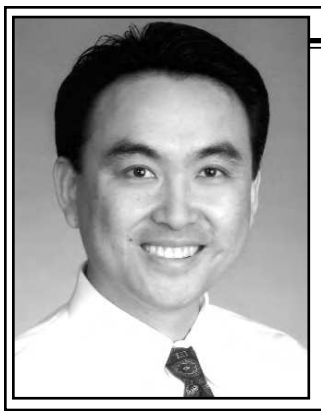

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Winter Reading 2003-2004

Underground Economy

***Reefer Madness: Sex, Drugs, and Cheap Labor in the American Black Market* by Eric Schlosser. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003. Hardover, $23.**

Eric Schlosser's new collection of three essays or exposés, brings us snippets of U.S. history that some might consider best left hidden. In these stories, we discover an underground economic engine that has left an undeniable mark on society, both by the products of the underground and by the forces committed to stopping them.

Schlosser's previous book, *Fast Food Nation,* told us about the fast food industry. Here he weaves a fascinating tale that looks at the pleasurable sins of our country. Our personal hunger for sex and drugs and business's desire for better profits has fueled a hidden economy that while not under the radar screens of government and culture, nonetheless cannot be easily quantified, tracked or stopped.

Efforts to stop underground commerce become the personal crusades of a few, who, through sheer force of will, work to change a nation's laws, habits and social values for better or for worse. Deciding who is right or wrong on issues of sex, drugs, and labor is a discussion that will go on indefinitely, with each side equally passionate about their views.

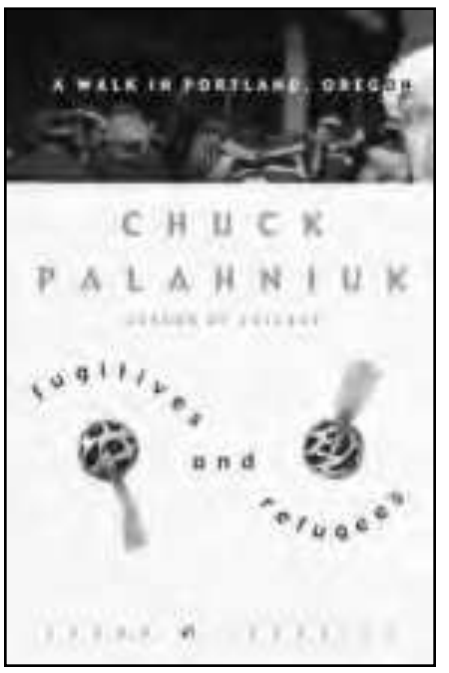
The first essay, "Reefer Madness" describes the growth of the marijuana trade into arguably one of our biggest cash crops, despite efforts of law officials to curb the trade. Schlosser highlights how the emotions in the war on drugs has led to the point where being convicted (rightly or wrongly) of marijuana trafficking leads to greater punishments than murder.

"In The Strawberry Fields" brings to light how our passion for exotic fruits such as strawberries has led to an exploitation of migrant labor that destroys the workers' hopes of a fair chance at the American Dream.

The final essay, "An Empire of the Obscene," tracks the growth of pornography and the U.S. sex industry by following the history of one entrepreneur of the trade. Schlosser contrasts the puritanical values that underlie our society against the reality of our desires.

Schlosser writes about his select subjects in a style that enlivens what is in essence a history of the phenomenal growth of these black market commodities. His book makes one stop to wonder if we, as a nation and society, need to re-evaluate what we are fighting against.

– Scott Stolarczyk



Strange Trip

***Fugitives and Refugees: A Walk in Portland, Oregon* by Chuck Palahniuk. Crown Publishers, 2003. Hardcover, $16.**

Novelist Chuck Palahniuk (*Fight Club*) has mischievously warped the guidebook genre with *Fugitives and Refugees*, a walk on the dark side of Rose City, USA. I can picture the PDX Chamber of Commerce debating whether to endorse this notorious homeboy's helpful hints for out-of-towners, sex tips for every persuasion, funky fun facts, and the ultra-bizarro with a twist of sleaze. It's my wild guess that you won't find this book on a shelf in Made in Oregon.

So step right up, the carnival is always in town! For women seeking men with hairy backs, there's Bear Hunting Night at the Dirty Duck Pub. If you want to yodel away your inhibitions, try Nasty Karaoke Night (Wednesday) at the Jefferson Theater. And guys and gals into whips and chains shouldn't miss the annual KinkFest sponsored by the Portland Leather Alliance.

Palahniuk also gives directions to Puddletown's mildly strange, which includes Suicide Bridge aka Vista Avenue Viaduct, the Feral Cat Races at PGE Park, and The World's Largest Hairball at Mount Angel. Is a theme emerging?

He mentions two of my favorites: the Starks Vacuum Cleaner Museum on Grand Avenue — check out the antique Hoovers — and the Historic Museum of Early Oil Days, with its splendid collection of gas pumps from the era of the Flying Red Horse.

Palahniuk's well-researched guide also lists worthy attractions such as Portland's Japanese and Chinese Gardens, hip watering holes, tasty eateries and dance halls with bouncy floors. He provides a personalized backdrop to his tour of Stumptown with a rambling memoir jotted on postcards, and he kick-starts his breezy blurbfest with a vocabulary lesson:

Can you define Three Groins in the Fountain, Big Pink, Jail-Blazers, Trendy-Third Ave., or Trustafarians? If not, you'll need this how-to-do Portland on a slow weekend manual, providing you have the nerve and the gasoline. — *Dave Johnson*

The Low and Noble

***The Immortal Class: Bike Messengers and the Cult of Human Power* by Travis Hugh Culley. Random House, 2002. Paperback, $11.95.**

"It was not love that made me a cyclist, nor was it any kind of innate passion for alleyways, punk rock, political disenfranchisement," writes Travis Hugh Culley. "I was a cyclist by default; I was broke."