

**But What If
We're
Wrong?
Chuck
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But What If We're Wrong?: Thinking About the Present As If It Were the Past

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New York Times bestselling author Chuck Klosterman asks questions that are profound in their simplicity: How certain are we about our understanding of gravity? How certain are we about our understanding of time? What will be the defining memory of rock music, five hundred years from today? How seriously should we view the content of our dreams? How seriously should we view the content of television? Are all sports destined for extinction? Is it possible that the greatest artist of our era is currently unknown (or—weirder still—widely known, but entirely disrespected)? Is it possible that we “overrate” democracy? And perhaps most disturbing, is it possible that we’ve reached the end of knowledge?

Klosterman visualizes the contemporary world as it will appear to those who'll perceive it as the distant past. Kinetically slingshotting through a broad spectrum of objective and subjective problems, *But What If We're Wrong?* is built on interviews with a variety of creative thinkers—George Saunders, David Byrne, Jonathan Lethem, Kathryn Schulz, Neil deGrasse Tyson, Brian Greene, Junot Díaz, Amanda Petrusich, Ryan Adams, Nick Bostrom, Dan Carlin, and Richard Linklater, among others—interwoven with the type of high-wire humor and nontraditional analysis only Klosterman would dare to attempt. It's a seemingly impossible achievement: a book about the things we cannot know, explained as if we did. It's about how we live now, once “now” has become “then.”

But What If We're Wrong?: Thinking About the Present As If It Were the Past Details

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From Reader Review But What If We're Wrong?: Thinking About the Present As If It Were the Past for online ebook

Peter Derk says

Best thing I've read this year.

The premise is pretty simple. Basically, Klosterman spends most of a book...not PROVING that we're wrong about just about everything, but asking questions that make us think, "If I step outside myself for a second, I COULD be wrong."

You'd be amazed the places he goes with this. He starts with fucking gravity! STARTS with. Not proving that gravity is nonexistent as we experience it, but that it may be an emergent force, which is a force that results from other things and therefore isn't its own force. Does that make any goddamn sense? He's better at this than I am. That's why I give his book 5 stars and mine 3. Plus, his covers look better. Plus, everything else besides his covers and clarity is also better.

I have some favorite parts, but I'm going to limit myself to one because I could be here all damn day.

I have to do this one because this is a point of personal passion for me, and I think Klosterman expresses something really important about the first amendment:

"There is no amendment more beloved, and it's the single most American sentiment that can be expressed. Yet its function is highly specific. It stops the government from limiting a person or an organization's freedom of expression (and that's critical, particularly if you want to launch an especially self-righteous alt weekly or an exceptionally lucrative church or the rap group N.W.A.). But in a capitalist society, it doesn't have much application within any scenario where the government doesn't have a vested interest in what's being expressed. If someone publishes an essay or tells a joke or performs a play that forwards a problematic idea, the US government generally wouldn't try to stop that person from doing so, even if they could. If the expression doesn't involve national security, the government generally doesn't give a shit. But if enough vocal consumers are personally offended, they can silence that artist just as effectively. They can petition advertisers and marginalize the artist's reception and economically remove that individual from whatever platform he or she happens to utilize, simply because there are no expression-based platforms that don't have an economic underpinning. It's one of those situations where the practical manifestation is the opposite of the technical intention: As Americans, we tend to look down on European countries that impose legal limitations on speech, yet as long as speakers in those countries stay within the specified boundaries, discourse is allowed relatively unfettered (even when it's unpopular). In the US, there are absolutely no speech boundaries imposed by the government, so the citizenry creates its own limitations, based on the arbitrary values of whichever activist group is most successful at inflicting its worldview upon an economically fragile public sphere. As a consequence, the United States is a safe place for those who want to criticize the government but a dangerous place for those who want to advance unpopular thoughts about any other subject that could be deemed insulting or otherwise. Some would argue that this trade-off is worth it. Time may prove otherwise."

Yes. Thank you.

There's this thing that people say. "Freedom of speech doesn't mean freedom from consequence."

I really hate that saying. Because if there are consequences for speech, then what part of it is free, exactly? Are you just reaffirming that you don't have the ability to physically stop a person from saying something? You're telling me that you're not Beetlejuice?

God, I can't tell you how long I've been waiting to use this GIF. I need to use a Beetlejuice GIF in everything. And also, I need to not say his name again in this review, lest I call him forth.

But anyway, are we saying that once unappreciated words leave a person's mouth, as long as we act within the law, it's game on to bring down whatever consequences we can? Because that's not freedom of expression at all. That's freedom of thought. Once the thought is expressed, it's subject to some pretty heavy restrictions.

I can write a blog about how I think my boss is stupid (I don't), and I can be fired for that. And if I DID get fired for that, people would blame me, not for thinking my boss is stupid (because my guess is 90% of people have expressed this), but for saying it. Off work time, not using work tools, I'm still an idiot for saying how I feel in the medium of my choosing.

I agree with Klosterman, it may be worse to have non-delineated consequences for non-specific types of speech than to have what appear to be restrictive laws. If the law makes some specifications, I can knowingly violate those and accept the consequences, or I can choose to operate within them and stay safe.

In the US, you don't have that option. If you say something that makes an individual or group upset, they may not be able to put you in jail, but they could certainly attack your personal life, your livelihood, just about anything they wanted to. This has happened many, many times, and I encourage you to check out Jon Ronson's *So You've Been Publicly Shamed* to find out more about just how devastating this type of consequence can be and how uneven and disproportionate its application is.

Frankly, I think what's fair and just is for everyone to know the rules. It's fair to pull me over for speeding when the limit is posted.

And the other thing, who the fuck died and made you the decider of what consequences a person deserves for pissing you off? And why did they have to die to make you in charge? Where were you at the time of the murder/coup? Seems like you had something to gain from the untimely demise of this unnamed individual who was formerly in charge. I have a lot of questions for you, buddy, and I think you should probably answer some of them before you get all high and mighty.

In all seriousness, I really dislike that we tout our freedom of speech when, in reality, the freedom is in your freedom to express things within parameters. You're free to say whatever you want as long as you're polite, considerate, on the right side of current events, and as long as you don't say something about someone who can fire you. Or you can be independently wealthy and above any significant consequence in terms of your ability to get and keep a gig. Of course, as with most rules, freedom of expression applies most to rich people. Go figure.

I feel, and I feel very strongly, that the right path is not to limit speech, whether we do that by participating in retweeting or blasting people with fire hoses, but to create more speech in opposition to the things we don't like. Not to ask for removal of or apologies for expression, creating what we assume to be a vacuum that we assume will SURELY be occupied by something good and wonderful and acceptable, but to instead skip

straight to creating the good and wonderful thing that would occupy the space directly adjacent to what we find distasteful. When it comes to books and art and movies and tweets, space is something we've got in spades. Trust me, I took a grad level class on information storage and retrieval, a field that, in the digital realm, is all about the ability to classify and locate things within an infinite space. There is no limit to the quantity of space we have for art and for expression anymore. The only limit is the one we put on, the limit of what we see as quality, but is more accurately boiled down to what we do and don't "like."

Klosterman said it better, of course:

"...there are intrinsic benefits to constantly probing the possibility that our assumptions about the future might be wrong: humility and wonder. It's good to view reality as beyond our understanding, because it is. And it's exciting to imagine the prospect of a reality that cannot be imagined, because that's as close to pansophical omniscience as we will ever come. If you aspire to be truly open-minded, you can't just try to see the other side of an argument. That's not enough. You have to go all the way."

I could be wrong. After reading this book, I could definitely be wrong.

And I could be wrong in thinking that limiting speech is not ultimately a good thing. I've been wrong about things before. I listened to ska music. A lot.

My perspective on it is just that we've tried it this way. We've tried to let faceless citizens decide what is and isn't acceptable speech. And it's worked, sort of, and it's not worked, sort of. And so, if we try it another way, the likely result is that it will ALSO sort of work and sort of not work.

But if we have a larger variety to choose from, a 31 flavors, if you will, as opposed to the single pint of ice cream in the fridge, I can make a choice. I can consume the flavors I like, or I can try out a new flavor, or I can be crazy, say fuck off to that pink tester spoon and get a whole scoop of something that turns out to be Mint Chocolate Chip, by which I mean a flavor lots of people love and I'm not crazy about.

And yes, there's a risk. Some disaffected youth working at 31 Flavors might cross-contaminate a flavor I love with some bullshit flavor, and once in a while I'll get a taste of something I don't care for. Perhaps I'll become sick because I ate a bit of something I'm allergic to.

But ultimately, my dislike of a flavor doesn't remove that flavor's right to exist, and doesn't have any bearing on whether or not someone else might enjoy that flavor.

I say, with full knowledge I could be totally wrong, that if you don't like any of the 31 flavors, your answer is not to ask that the store remove a flavor in hopes they'll replace it with something you love. It's to ask them to get 32 flavors.

Please note that this analogy does not apply in any way to that pink ice cream with the bubble gum bits in it. That's vile. That's like dipping your Bubble Tape into a glass of milk before chewing.

Katie says

This was a fun book. I received an ARC in exchange for my review, and I have to say that I would strongly recommend this to anyone who loves to ask "What if?" This is one of those books you just can't take

seriously at all, but if you're willing to follow the author down the hypothetical scenario rabbit hole, it's quite amusing. You will ponder who the next Kafka will be, whether the Beatles will still be historically important in the far future, whether there is another version of you (or multiple versions of you) out in the vast universe, among many other silly things.

Klosterman is funny, but he's also intelligent despite his self-deprecating nature. If you like philosophy, or just want to read something that is unusual, pick this up. It's a fast read and is thought provoking in its own right.

Justin says

This was my first Klosterman book and my first nonfiction book in a minute as the kids say. I really liked most of the book. It's pretty abstract, there aren't any answers to the questions he's asking since we can't see into the future, but I enjoyed the discussion and trying to gaze into the crystal ball.

The premise of the book is trying to look at the present as if it were the past, basically putting ourselves into a time machine and looking back at our current times from a variety of angles. Each chapter tackles a different part of our culture from books to TV to football to science to politics and beyond. His writing is excellent. Klosterman can weave sentences together with adjectives you may not use everyday in a very readable fashion. I loved his prose and the ideas he presented throughout the book.

Is Breaking Bad going to be viewed as the best show off all time in 100 years? Will TV even matter anymore, or will it be done archaic thing people did in the past like listening to radio programs or buying cassette tapes?

Will the NFL still exist in the future, or will concussions and possible deaths end the sport? Or do we really wanna see more violence after all and keep it going?

Are there other universes out there we don't even know about and never will know about? Can we ever know more about the infinite universe we live in? How far can science take us in understanding ourselves and the world?

Big questions, few answers, but the intellectual arguments and opinions shared by Klosterman and others are very interesting to consider and think about pop culture from a completely different perspective. Plus, we have a lot in common. All the bands, TV shows, movies, and celebrities were stuff I consume and enjoy. It made the whole thing thought provoking but also something I could relate to personally. It felt at times like talking to a friend while drinking at a local bar drinking a local IPA because every else would you be drinking anyway?

Rob says

There's a subset of readers who will adore Chuck Klosterman's most recent book, *But What if We're Wrong?*, and a second (likely larger) subset who will view it as frustrating and pointless intellectual masturbation. I'm firmly in the first camp, and not just because my job demands I have a high tolerance for frustrating and pointless intellectual masturbation. I've been a fan of Klosterman's for years, mainly because he speaks my

middle-aged pop-culture-obsessed nerd lingo. And while that side of him is present here (at one point he describes the perpetually delayed date when Ray Kurzweil expects the Singularity to occur as being the scientific equivalent of Guns 'n' Roses' monumentally tardy album *Chinese Democracy*), this is the first of Klosterman's nonfiction books that doesn't have pop culture analysis as its focus.

Essentially a series of thought experiments, *But What if We're Wrong?* asks what would happen if some of our deepest-held beliefs turned out to be completely incorrect. What would it mean if it turns out the greatest author of our time period isn't David Foster Wallace or Jonathan Franzen or Philip Roth but someone whose work isn't discovered until 100 years from now (à la Melville's *Moby-Dick*)? What would it mean if the Phantom Time Hypothesis (the conspiracy theory that says the Catholic church essentially falsified the historical record from AD 614 to 911) were actually true? What would it mean if we're living in a sophisticated computer simulation, as has been posited by Nick Bostrom, a professor at the University of Oxford? Klosterman unpacks each of these ideas (and several more) over the course of a relatively breezy 250ish pages.

And that's the important thing about the book: it's never dull or pedantic, even when Klosterman's wrestling with some fairly heavy stuff. He has an entire chapter that draws on interviews with Neil deGrasse Tyson and Brian Greene (of Columbia University) to dissect the nature of scientific paradigms and discuss whether Thomas Kuhn's book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (which I vaguely remember reading in my Ph.D. program) is worth much of anything at all. It's not the kind of subject matter that normally sets my world on fire, but Klosterman approaches it accessibly and with his usual sense of humor, recognizing that he has more in common with his readers than he does with the scientists and he should write accordingly.

It's a book that won't appeal to everyone. But for those who like puzzles and can stomach a hefty dose of ambiguity, this will be one of the most entertaining things you read all year.

Jamie says

3.5-4 stars

I loved this book up until about half way through. It was covering topics like string theory, the multiverse, and our understanding of gravity. One of my favorites- "As a species, the concept of infinity might be too much for us. I suspect the human conception of infinity is akin to a dog's conception of a clock". -love this!

Discussions with Tyson and Greene-Aristotle and Galileo make appearances throughout-I also loved the chapter on history- with Klosterman's saying, "history is defined by people who don't really understand what they are defining".

Then, about half way through the book, it just switches to the NFL and TV- Both of which I'm not a huge fan of, so I couldn't really understand the hype or ponder too much on these subjects.

All the major questions presented in the book though are never answered-maybe, for the reader, to come up with your own conclusions.

Overall, I do have to say I really did enjoy this book and tabbed so many quotes.

Casey says

Don't go into this book if you really expect to learn something or encounter firm opinions from Chuck Klosterman (except, of course, his wholly incorrect view on the movie Independence Day). I thought I might hate this book going by the first chapter, which seemed to talk in circles about doubt and certainty. Fortunately, subsequent sections are arranged around different themes, and the focus does Klosterman a world of good. Nobody wants to read nearly 300 pages of that annoying devil's advocate friend talk to themselves (except, of course, possibly THAT annoying friend).

How you'll feel about this book really depends on your interests. I found the section on music the most compelling both due to my views and Klosterman's past covering pop culture. Dreams? I don't really care so much. Sports? Not really my bag, but considering the end of their relevance was definitely more engaging than I expected. It's fun at the length it is, but any longer and it would just get tedious.

I was slightly disappointed to find that a couple of the cultural references in *But What If We're Wrong?* are already dated. Perhaps that proves Klosterman's point in writing the book, but I don't think it bodes well for the book aging well. But hey, what do I know?

I received an advance review copy from Penguin's First to Read program in exchange for a review.

Holly says

The questions that obsess Klosterman are not ones that keep me up at night. A few years ago I tried to read Kathryn Schulz's *Being Wrong* and I hadn't been compelled to finish. But this was a lot of fun to read, and it required a lot of *thinking* (I claim to enjoy that, but sometimes this made my head hurt. Don't know if it was the thoughts or CK's meandering writing style.) He's sort of conducting Gedankenexperiments, so I thought of those terms like "backcasting" and "hindcasting", but I don't know anything about how to do that or how to explain them - and presumably neither does Klosterman! He covers a lot of subjects, but some parts are better than others. I got worried for him when he approached physics and cosmology - I wish he hadn't tried to pit Neil deGrasse Tyson and Brian Greene against each other - which was just embarrassing for him, though he may not realize it. - You can't apply the same questions to physics that you do to rock n roll. He does oversimplify a lot of the thinkers he mentions, such as Thomas Kuhn (and deGrasse Tyson is right to get annoyed with Klosterman because he probably realizes he was going to write like that). I had been thinking of Horgan's *The End of Science* as I got into the second half of the book, so I was gratified when Klosterman brought it up (maybe we do think a little alike?). My favorite section was the Simulation idea (that we are living in a simulation). In that context he mentions the Large Hadron Collider at CERN (and my favorite Netflix documentary "Particle Fever") - I thought he was going to mention the conspiracy theories around the LHC, and the fascinating reasons why it keeps running into problems (it is a time travel machine and something is preventing it from working because it's going to open a giant black hole ...). That would have fed right into Klosterman's thesis! But the fact that he didn't is just mildly frustrating because there are dozens of other things he also could have discussed - it's that kind of book: meandering and thought-provoking. Not always carefully written (third rail? he doesn't know what that means; and he makes a big error in his hedgehog story) but always something to argue with.

D.L. Morrese says

From the title and the blurb I expected this book would address basic assumptions that we, as a culture, seldom question but which are not necessarily true. It doesn't do that. Although there is a little about science and some philosophical underpinnings of the U.S. Constitution, most of the book looks at pop culture—fiction, TV, music, and sports—and asks if the assessments of contemporary critics will reflect how people of the future judge these things.

My initial reaction was something like, "Don't know. Don't care. Not important." Admittedly, I'm not a big fan of such things. I seldom watch TV, have never followed sports, and don't much care for pop music or most books that appear on bestseller lists. (I have quirky tastes in fiction and music.) It's not that pop music and TV sitcoms aren't culturally significant, it's just that I was hoping for a bit more depth in this book.

I'll give you an example of what I mean. Until about the middle of the last century, most Americans seemed to assume that people whose ancestors had not come from north-western Europe (excluding Ireland, for some reason), were intellectually and morally inferior. That was a pervasive and almost unquestioned belief. But then someone asked, "But what if we're wrong?"

There are many cultural assumptions that could stand a bit of scrutiny—religion, the free market, democracy.... These are important. How a cultural anthropologist in the year 3016 will regard the TV show *Three's Company* or the music of the Sex Pistols? Not so much.

Michael Buonagurio says

I usually love reading Klosterman, but this book was difficult to get through and on the whole not enjoyable unfortunately. It's fun to listen to him on Bill Simmons' podcast present unorthodox views on sports or cultural events, and his celebrity profiles are always fresh and have a distinct slant to them. But I felt his writing style, which was unnecessarily convoluted at times, wasn't a great fit for this subject matter. High brow writing about low brow topics is where he seems to excel. It felt like the editor should have kept the author a bit more focused and the writing a good deal tighter if Klosterman wanted to tackle some big hairy topics like gravity and freedom. There were a number of stretches that felt like I was being forced to wonder around in the author's stream of consciousness ramblings that didn't match the weightier tone of the topics. That said, for die hard fans it's still a decent way to get your reading fix for the day.

Benjamin says

I really want to give this more stars, I should have liked it- but, ugh. Yes, I'm sure lots of the things we now believe about reality may one day be proven wrong, but so what? How does that effect our lives? Well, as the author states it doesn't because most people don't care. The shepherd in 1500 A.D. who was suddenly told the earth went around the sun and not vice versa, was shocked and then went back to his sheep. We're just the same, centuries from now when we finally unlock the secrets of the quantum and launch the star-ships most people will probably still be more concerned about finding money, power, and love than awed by the fact we can actually understand and colonize the universe.

And why so much space spent on analyzing TV? Yes the future will have a much different understanding of ourselves then we will, and I'm sure we have ridiculous ideas about how ancient Egyptians lived and felt, but so what?

Everyone will seem ridiculous when they're dead, or if they live long enough; hopefully that represents progress.

James Murphy says

This is a terribly interesting book. Klosterman speculates about what in our present lives will still have significance in the far future and how it will be perceived. It's a book about perspectives and also a book of criticism. He devotes time to questions about which books of our time will still be read 200 or 300 years from now, what songs and artists will be perceived as epitomizing our age. What is the future of sports? What is the future of American democracy? Are we at the end of science or do we not yet know what we don't know? Does the fact of the internet mean the end of knowledge? Klosterman writes at length about such topics and more. He writes with a lot of humor, some of it self-deprecatory, but he also considers his topics with high seriousness. There's a lot to chew on in the book. When I read I mark passages that especially resonate with those little plastic sticky Post-It page points. By the time I finished the book it looked like a colorful porcupine.

Kirsty says

As the opening chapter questions whether we could be wrong about the existence of gravity, I thought this would be a book about philosophy and the nature of existence. Of course, I should have looked closely at the author's name - Chuck Klosterman writes about the arts and pop culture, so rather than questioning the nature of existence, mostly this book questions our value judgements on the arts and pop culture. The chapter on books asks just how wrong we can be about who will be the voice of this generation. The chapter on music asks how rock music will be remembered 100 years in the future. And so on through TV and televised sports.

There is one chapter of philosophical questions, asking: what if reality is just a computer simulation? What if our dreams are more significant than we think? This was my favourite chapter, and I wish the whole book was more along these lines. Oh well, no use wishing a book was something that it's not.

Each chapter is slightly too long - the reader already gets the point, but Klosterman still gives us one more example just in case. Still, his style is always enjoyable, and this book did change the way I thought about what I (and everyone) consider 'good' art.

I'm currently struggling with the first draft of my second novel, and this book reminded me that it doesn't matter what I write anyway - in time I will be forgotten or remembered based on future criteria we can't even begin to imagine. So I might as well just try to tell a good story.

One of my favourites of 2016, in the category 'Best Book About Pop Culture':

<http://www.kirstylogan.com/best-books...>

fortuna.spinning says

“History is defined by people who don’t really understand what they are defining.”

This was a really fascinating and thought-provoking read! Klosterman takes a sociological look at several cultural facets, asking sometimes bizarre, but poignant questions. I particularly liked the part about authors and writing (naturally!) and the section on the US Constitution. Overall, a great read!

Trin says

A book-long pointless intellectual exercise, but a *really* fun and interesting one. This is my favorite Klosterman in a while: it's both more serious and thoughtful, and funnier, than his last few efforts. If you'd like the experience of a truly excellent semi-sober dinner conversation with a smart, surprising companion but in book form, well -- here it is!

Stevie Kincade says

I don't always read non-SF/F but when I do, I like to make sure it's the kind of non-fiction that makes me incredibly annoying at parties. God, you should have seen me the year I read Malcolm Gladwell's "Blink", I could hammer the thought-candy from that book into any conversation about anything at all.

Gladwell's premise is that throughout history we have been completely wrong about *everything* SO, what things that we accept as completely true now, will we look back on in 500 years and laugh at?

He asks this question about pretty much all my favourite subjects: Science, Music, Books and TV. Then, just in case he thought he might lose me, he touches on my other favourite subjects: The singularity, Simulation theory, the phantom time hypothesis and the role of DMT in consciousness.

Well thank you Chuck! You might have lost me otherwise!

If we won't be alive in 300 or a thousand years, what difference would it make if we are unknowingly wrong about everything, much less anything? Isn't being right for the sake of being right pretty much the only possible motive for any attempt at thinking about today from the imagined vantage point of tomorrow? If it turns out that the citizens of 2216 have forgotten the Beatles while remembering the Butthole Surfers, what difference will that make to all the dead people from the 20th century who never saw it coming?

/nods head while thinking *nice Butthole Surfers reference Chuck!*

The stakes here are not super high although the issue of climate change is touched on briefly. In Klosterman's own words he describes being wrong about most issues as *detrimental not dangerous*. This is the kind of pop culture philosophy that will have you spouting its ideas to your friends as they stroke their carefully manicured facial hair in deep thought while drinking a kale shake. Klosterman avoids the sort of stoner-wondering of *Dude, dude, like what if the red that YOU see is NOT the red that I See* ...Eell....actually he DOES wonder this but he does it more eloquently! (and it is not the worst question to ask).

Klosterman isn't interested in guessing what things we underrate now will become important in the future. He instead looks to the past at how paradigm shifts caused the art of prior generations to be viewed in an entirely different light and what this could mean going forward. Herman Melville didn't know there was a world war coming. After it did, his books became interpreted through a new filter and he went from also-ran to literary giant. It was fascinating looking at who the literary critics of the 1920's thought were the important writers and poets and then who *became* important and remembered and why.

In one amusing passage Klosterman asks us to imagine for a moment that ancient Egypt had television and we just unearthed the entire archive. He makes the point that the thing we would be MOST interested in the national news, then the local news, then the advertisements. The thing we would be LEAST interested in is "Prestige Egyptian drama" whatever that may have been.

This leads Klosterman to ask *What is the realist fake thing we have ever made on purpose?*

I am familiar with Klosterman mainly through his appearances on Bill Simmon's podcast. I added this to my "to read" list after hearing Klosterman talk about these ideas in depth on Maron's WTF podcast. I like Klosterman's manic, rapid fire way of speaking (particularly at 1.5x speed) so I was a bit disappointed he only read the introduction and afterward for the audiobook. The narrator was fine but a non fiction audiobook is just yknow - reading.

I am not really sure how to rate nonfiction but if you love to think and argue about culture then I can highly recommend you check this one out. Just stay away from me at parties.

Sam Quixote says

In his latest book, Chuck Klosterman takes a look at the present as if it were the distant past, posing some interesting thought experiments: what will people think of the early 21st century in 500 years' time? Will rock music still be popular and who will be remembered as the epitome of the genre? Will team sports like football still be popular? Who will be remembered as the most significant writer of this time? Has science reached an impasse or are we about to discover a major new bountiful field of research? Will democracy become a distant memory as humanity discovers a better political system?

But What If We're Wrong? isn't a bad book but I didn't love it either, mostly for the style it was written in rather than the content.

Klosterman was a Rolling Stone writer for many years so it's no surprise the sections on pop culture are the best in the book. Coming to the conclusion that Chuck Berry will be the defining figure of rock'n'roll for future people was an amusing journey though his answer as to who will be the defining writer of this age - unknown - was a cop-out.

In his chapter on how colours are viewed through the years, I learned about a 2015 meme called The Dress which was fascinating. It's a photo of a white and gold dress that's actually black and blue - google it and make up your own mind! Also a number of the interviewees like filmmaker Richard Linklater, scientist Neil deGrasse-Tyson and writer George Saunders have some fascinating ideas on their subjects - Linklater's views on dreams and how we should view them as far more important than we currently do was very thoughtful and convincing.

Some of Klosterman's theses though are a bit outrageous. Team sports like American football will be completely unpopular in just a few decades? Come on. And while Klosterman is strong on pop culture, he's weak on science, history and philosophy. He claims that democracy didn't work for people in the Ancient World which is why they turned to tyrants to rule over them.

What?! No examples, just a sweeping, stupid statement that fails to take into account how different their concept of democracy was to ours today and the lack of choice in that sort of switch - people don't select tyrants (that would be democratic), they seize power themselves! And contemporary people are turned off of the idea of tyrants because of bad recent examples like Hitler and Stalin? What a doofus. There have never been benevolent tyrants ever. The same goes for the sections on science and philosophy which are similarly shakily constructed and questionable. He really should've just stuck with pop culture in this book.

The premise seems obvious and can't be argued with; after all the present is always changing and what we believe in a hundred years will of course be vastly different from what we believe today. It's still amazing though to contemplate the sheer amount of information each of us has about whatever we're interested in will become largely forgotten to all but future scholars of this time.

What do most of us know about 19th century France off the top of our heads? Napoleon I to III, some French writers like Alexandre Dumas and Victor Hugo, the Eiffel Tower - surface level stuff! Take that back even further to 500 years ago and what do we know about the 16th century world? Everything now will be recorded but most people 500 years from now won't care to look it up - it'll all largely be forgotten.

Maybe the only significant factoid future people will remember about the early 21st century will be that America elected its first black president (shortly before electing its second, Kanye West)! Puts it all in perspective doesn't it? All the bullshit we yammer on about, gone, replaced with the bullshit future generations will be yammering on about, and so on.

It's not the content that lets the book down, it's Klosterman's writing style. He has this rambling, circular, extremely pedantic way of writing that becomes tiresome after getting through, say, 10 pages - that's why it took me nearly two months to make my way through a relatively short 262 page book! The TV chapter felt especially overlong. Klosterman makes the case that prestige TV - The Wire, Breaking Bad, etc. - will be far less valuable to cultural historians in the future than the news and footage ordinary people shot and uploaded to YouTube. Fair enough - but an entire chapter to make that point??

Actually you could make the case for the entire book - the thesis is fairly succinct and self-explanatory from the start! It more or less reads like a great magazine article pitch that got out of hand, especially as its length doesn't really improve on its central thesis, it just shows you that Klosterman can witter on at length when he needs to!

But of course that's not really the point. Even though wondering about how people 500 years from now will view our time makes no difference to anyone currently alive and the whole exercise is based on Klosterman's thoughts and is admittedly pointless, parts of it are entertaining to read about, even if his plodding, must-include-every-possible-angle style of writing makes you want to brain him! Really patient readers will get the most out of this one but I'd say for more general readers, *But What If We're Wrong?* is an easy one to skip even if you're a Chuck Klosterman fan.

Eric Lin says

You may expect this book to be filled with doubt (and it is), but even more so, it advocates humility.

In *But What If We're Wrong?*, Chuck Klosterman jumps from topic to topic, questioning some of the opinions that society has more or less reached consensus on. Some of these are objective (our understanding of gravity), and some are subjective (who will be considered the greatest writer of the 21st century?), but it's interesting to think about "Opinion" in the macro sense of what society believes (in the aggregate), rather than the petty differences of opinion in the moment that get lost once public opinion has congealed. Dan Carlin, from the *Hardcore History* podcast also engages in this sort of thinking (and is actually interviewed for this book). It's the *Family Feud* approach to collective opinion, where nobody cares if you're right or wrong in the long term, but judgment is passed on society as a single hive-mind.

Some of the passages remind me of a horrible epistemology class that I took as an undergrad, where we held endless debates about how we know what we know: Can we ever truly prove our existence isn't as a brain in a vat (or players in an alien video game, if we're going with Elon Musk's version)? Are things that happen to us in a dream are less real than things that happen in the real world? Does any of this matter?

There is a limit to the usefulness of doubt, and there are a few parts of the book where Klosterman flies off the rails. I think he's aware of this, since you can hear him struggling to figure out what an appropriate amount of doubt would be necessary to make his point, while not making him sound like a conspiracy theorist who is clinging to sanity by a thread.

But ultimately, I think Klosterman pulls it off, and his last few paragraphs really resonated with me. My takeaway: we are most likely wrong about a lot of things, but once in a while, we're (surprisingly, miraculously) right, and we're collectively rooting for the most improbable of outcomes - that our understanding of the world will continue to hold.

Donna says

No. No. No. I'm not sure what went wrong. I usually love books like this...really! This type of nonfiction, even the absurd, are books I enjoy. But this one....not so much. I think my main issue was that I did the audio and the author liked himself and his topics of discussion enough for both of us....way more than I ever could. He sounded like he was the greatest thing and everything was so important. Bottom line: I wasn't feeling it. He thought he was so witty, and that was such a huge turn off for me. Eventually, when I could separate the narration from the message, I was able to go along with it, but I was still rolling my eyes. So 2 stars.

emma says

Excuse me. I just have to go pat myself on the back for ninety minutes for having read nonfiction voluntarily. My brain is bigger than yours, and I am the greatest person alive.

I don't run, so I don't know what a runner's high feels like and I never will and I never want to, but I imagine it's a lot like finishing a nonfiction book you read without anyone making you. Because, like, wow. I feel like I just won a MacArthur grant, or discovered a new law of physics, or something.

Despite the fact that this book was pretty much a pleasure to read! I'm still all cocky and half-convinced my brain doubled in volume.

Anyway.

But What If We're Wrong? is a fascinating book with a terrible cover. (I never stopped picking it up upside down. Never.) Divided into chapters by subject (like "books," "science," etc.), the author attempts to predict the ways we'll have changed our thinking in a handful of decades or so - the ways that we're wrong.

Really, it's an attempt to predict the future. And it's grueling and confusing and far from comprehensive and overexcused and absolutely, totally awesome.

I'm obsessed with the simulation theory, and I was long before this book, but it took me doing a lot of reading and annoying, hard critical thinking to understand it. This book contains *such* a streamlined explanation that, in the week following my completion of it, I ranted at essentially everyone who would listen about the simulation theory.

I completely stole Klosterman's explanation.

I can't stress enough that this book includes way too many caveats. (We get it, Chuck. You can't actually predict the future, or even really give a very good guess. It's the future; that's the point. You're reducing your ethos!!!!) (Yes, I just took a public speaking class. Shut up, it was required.)

Some of the chapters were also much less interesting than others, which is my fault for only being interested in like 3 subjects.

Chunks of this were very confusing, which was also confusing because a lot of it was so well-explained. But I imagine I have a much lower knowledge base than a lot of people reading this, so. Also forgiven.

Overall, this was a much funner and easier and more likable nonfiction read than practically all of them.

Or maybe I'm just really, really hard on nonfiction as a subject.

Bottom line: VERY GOOD STUFF. Read this and feel smart and pretentious.

Todd says

Every time I read an essay by Chuck Klosterman -- and, given my interest in music and pop culture, I've read a number of them -- I'm struck by his self-deprecating tone. It's the written equivalent of throat clearing and foot shuffling: parenthetical asides, wryly humorous footnotes, run-on digressions from his central point. It can be charming.

But in small doses, and in the right context. In "But What If We're Wrong?" it becomes, frankly, annoying.

The book's conceit is a good one: What will matter in 300 or 500 years? What will survive of our culture? After all, as Klosterman observes, if you look at what people valued or how they thought in 1600 or 1700, much of it is now considered wrong (scientific ideas) or minor (popular books of the era). Pop culture/art &

literature, in particular, has a way of disappearing and then being revived, as with Melville's "Moby-Dick" (a failure when it appeared, and forgotten until about 50 years later) or any number of movies (though God help us if Michael Bay is taken seriously by 22nd-century cineastes).

When it comes to his wheelhouse, music, Klosterman is at his best. Assuming rock music is simply a bygone genre by 2200, what aspects of it will remain? What artist will stand out as being most representative? After making the usual distinctions between "rock 'n' roll" and "rock" and "pop" -- distinctions he acknowledges will likely be pointless, and perhaps already are -- he comes to a conclusion that Chuck Berry will be the last man standing. Which anyone familiar with the "SNL" sketch about the alien response to Voyager -- "Send more Chuck Berry" -- could have guessed.

He has some provocative digressions about "merit" (does it matter? who decides?) and perception (is your idea of "blue" the same as mine?) but soon gets trapped in muddier waters. Perhaps the nadir is a chapter on scientific truth, from which Klosterman segues into a discussion of philosophical truth.

It bugged me in two ways. For one, the point of science is to suggest theories based on observable phenomena, or at least some mathematical bedrock. If you want to throw in "Matrix"-like concepts of living in a dream world or alien-manufactured simulation, feel free -- but it stands outside the science. (It makes me think of Douglas Adams, frankly. And thanks for all the fish!) In science, if a hypothesis doesn't pan out, then you construct a new one based on the evidence. This is a continual process.

The other was in Klosterman's shambling style. It's reasonable to speak out loud about the blind alleys of your thought process, but it's also reasonable to have an editor who can remove some of that conversation from the end product -- as well as some of the lesser jokes. Here, Klosterman's meanderings are no better than a late-night college bull session.

Other essays fall between these two poles -- a discussion of the future of football, for example, or the Internet trope of "You're doing it wrong."

The thing is, Klosterman's a bright guy. Even when I wished he would remove a reference to some mediocre '90s band, I kept reading because the ideas he's working with are fascinating. If he'd written a whole (assertive) book on the musicians/TV shows/movies/etc. that people would be talking about in 300 years he may have been on firmer ground. But in trying to be expansive, he just becomes tedious. (For science, a better view is Bill Bryson's often wide-eyed "A Short History of Nearly Everything," which does a good job of translating difficult concepts to the layman's level -- that is, mine -- as well as leavening it with enough humor to make it sing.)

Also, it makes the book lumpy. For that, I blame his editor, who could have smoothed things out considerably, but decided to let Klosterman be Klosterman.

So, come for the music. But go elsewhere for the science and philosophy. And send more Chuck Berry.
