

An Interview With Claire Zulkey

Almost 2 years ago, Claire Zulkey launched zulkey.com, an online diary updated every weekday with lists, stories, and interviews. In addition, the Georgetown graduate has had her writing published in many different places. Her first book, "Girls! Girls! Girls!" is now available from So New Media. We here at Placebo Effect enjoy Ms. Zulkey's work and would like you all to buy her book at sonewmedia.com.

-Scott Tomford

Placebo Effect: Tell the readers a little about yourself.

Claire Zulkey: Hmm, well. I live in Ch-cago and I'm 5'4 with brown hair. My day job is assisting the editor of a medical journal. I've done writing for NPR, Second City, the Ch-cago Tribune and McSweeney's Internet Tendency. My book,

"Girls! Girls! Girls!" will be released from So New Media by Christmas, God willing, and I really hope it does well. And I like baseball.

PE: Tell us a little more about the book. What's on it? How long is it? Is it worth my milk money?

CZ: What's on it? You mean like the cover? A bunch of wedding dresses and words such as "Girls! Girls! Girls!" and my name. What's in it is lots of little vignettes of literary humor like jokey stories, essays, lists, etc. The center of it is kind of through the female point of view, but without really going for the female stereotype. I think it's about 65 pages. And of course it's worth your money. It's 10 dollars, and it makes a good Christmas or Chanukah gift.

PE: Do you think this book is going to springboard you to bigger and better things?

CZ: I hope so. An agent expressed interest in me, so I'll send a copy to her. I'd like to do a book of my interviews one day.

PE: Which segues into my next question...you've done a lot of interviews on your website, ranging from family to larger celebrities (Harry Shearer of Spinal Tap and the Simpsons, Michael Ian Black of Ed and I Love the 80's), which are your favorites and why?

CZ: [New Yorker Writer] George Saunders was definitely one of my favorites. He was so nice and took it seriously, so it came out to be a fun but informative interview. I get lots of

feedback on the interview with my mom. I guess people really like that one. She and I are alike in some ways so I guess it's sort of me interviewing a (not much) older, wiser semi version of myself. But I enjoy them all. Some are obviously a bit juicier than the others, but they're always fun to do. I ask people lots of questions all the time, so I might as well publish them and their answers.

PE: Now, you've obviously been published by many places, some prominent, others not-so prominent. What are some places you haven't been published by but very much wish to?

CZ: Good question. I'm not totally sure where I want to be yet. There are a lot of lofty semi-goals, like it'd be nice to be in the New York Times, or the New Yorker, or to win an Oscar for best screenplay, or to write for SNL. But those change with the hour. I am working more on freelancing for magazines. That's slow work but I figure I can do it. I'm already doing some work for an inflight magazine, which I know sounds boring but it's really fun and a good assignment, so I'll keep plugging away.

PE: Now, how did you first start getting involved with Second City? [The Second City is a legendary Ch-cago comedy club that gave such comedians as John Belushi and Chris Farley their starts].

CZ: They offer a writing course, and basically, if you make it all the way through the five levels, you get to do a show. So the dirty secret is that if you show up and do funny work and pay tuition, you get a show, so I guess technically I bought my part in it. But it took about a year to do (the whole course) and

a few months to put together. I had written a play in college and done some theater stuff in high school so it wasn't entirely new. It's a lot of fun, but as somebody who works alone a lot it can be nerve-wracking putting your work into the hands of others. It never fails that the actor nails it the night that none of your friends/family came, and blows his/her lines the show that your family, friends and ex-boyfriends are there.

PE: Now judging by many references to it in your diary, and a piece about it in McSweeney's, you seem to be a big fan of "I Love the 80's". How much do you love the 80s? Do you have posters of ALF and Corey Feldman?

CZ: No, unfortunately. I love the '80's somewhat but you have to remember, I was like 8 when the eighties ended. I have a problem with I Love the 80's Strikes Back because that covers a lot of stuff that I was already familiar with, like the smurfs and thundercats and jelly shoes. I liked the original I Love the 80's because it was about stuff that was going on while I was still a kid, which is probably dignifying it a lot more than it should be. But I do love eighties music and eighties movies, etc. I guess it does remind me of a kid, because when I was that age everybody who was in high school seemed so OLD, so cool and torn jeans/bubble gum, etc.

PE: It's kind of a hypnotic show. I want to trash VH1 but I can't stop watching.

CZ: Yeah you gotta tear yourself away or else you just get sucked into all their other crappy shows.

PE: What advice can you give to younger writers who are still trying to get their first pieces published? What was it like for you when you started?

CZ: Unfortunately, writing is sort of like dieting. The best advice is the long, slow, hard advice. Do it every day. Talk to people to get encouragement. It hurts, but show your writing to others for feedback (but only if you want it and only if you can take it). When you're starting out, write for whatever you can, because somebody is bound to see it. If you're going to revise something that you wrote, print it out and do it on hard copy. I'm not sure why that works but it does. Take yourself seriously but not so seriously that you're not having fun. Try and take a little time every day, even if it's while you're in the shower or having a cigarette or working out or whatever, to think of at least one new idea, even if it stinks. Did I say write as much as you can? Because I'll say it again if I did.

PE: You've been very graceful and patient in putting with a 16 year old who's interviewing you for a never before seen, obscure quarterly publication and I thank you. Now to steal from your website, how does it feel to be the first person interviewed by Placebo Effect?

CZ: It feels great, although they say that first is the worst.

PE: Would you rather be third with a hairy chest?

CZ: I kind of already am, but don't tell anyone

PE: Hah.

CZ: That's going to be the headline, isn't it?

PE: Perhaps. Or it will make a great ending at least

CZ: "Hairy Chested Web Writer Talks About Nothing"