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Confessions of a Raving, Unconfined Nut: Misadventures in the Counter-Culture. Paul Krassner. New York, Simon & Schuster, 1993, 352 pages, $23.00, hard.

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Paul Krassner's *Confessions of a Raving, Unconfined Nut: Misadventures in the Counter-Culture* is at once a rich cultural history of America in the second half of the twentieth century and a fascinating autobiography. Humor, Krassner's "lifetime filter for perceiving reality and its rules," is at the book's heart. He woke up to the lesson "*One person's logic is another person's humor*" when, at age six, he stood on the stage of Carnegie Hall playing Vivaldi's Concerto in A Minor on the violin and faced the problem of an itching leg. He balanced on his left foot and scratched his left leg with his right foot without missing a note. The audience's laughter was an epiphany of religious proportions: "Zapped by the god of Absurdity," Krassner discovered his identity in that laughter. It was a coming to awareness that eventually helped reshape a nation. According to Krassner, "the counter-culture of the sixties evolved and exploded out of the blandness and repression of the Eisenhower–Nixon years." This book is an account of that evolution and that explosion by one of the era's most active and effective counter-culture leaders. The apparently rock-solid monolithic institutions of mid-century America were shaken by humorists which the establishment mistook for buffoons. *Confessions* should be required reading in those "sixties" courses springing up in academia but it has been, and may continue to be, generally overlooked or even ignored. The chief reason is the nature of humor. While laughter has undeniably been a perpetually powerful weapon — from Aristophanes through Swift and Voltaire to Twain and Vonnegut — those who expect their truths clothed in solemnity tend not to take Krassner seriously.

I am especially and deeply indebted to Raymond Russ for two things. In 1967, as a student in my freshman composition class, he introduced me to the savage delights of Paul Krassner and *The Realist*. A few years later he gave me handball, which has remained my favorite sport. Both the periodical and the sport have a purity that borders on the spiritual; both have nourished my soul. Dr. Russ originally wished to write this review himself, and he probably should have written it, but the man who was Cosmo Joe in the sixties has an intimacy with the era that made his effort unsettling, as if he were betraying family secrets. Though I knew this would be painful to write, I could not refuse Dr. Russ's request that I substitute for him: my debt was too great. Obligation and admiration compelled me to write this review. Requests for reprints should be sent to Steven Connelly, Ph.D., English Department, Indiana State University, Terre Haute, Indiana 47809.

"Not *in vino veritas*," James Joyce said, "but *in risu veritas*." "In laughter is truth" would be an apt motto for Paul Krassner, whose life has been devoted to using humor to reveal the truth. Yet for all its stalwart history, humor remains difficult to take seriously. We are conditioned to take *solemn* vows, to speak and seek the *solemn* truth, as though serious and solemn are synonyms. Krassner is invariably serious, but he is never solemn. Indeed, *Confessions* is, among other things, a chronicle of the counter-culture's use of its chief weapon: comedy, comedy in all its manifestations, from stinging satire to gentle wit. With the help of Lyle Stuart, his "media mentor" and "unrelenting guru," Krassner founded *The Realist*, which he envisioned as a magazine of "free-thought criticism and satire." It was not something he took lightly, placing himself in America's "powerful tradition of alternative journalism," which "could be traced all the way back to Benjamin Franklin and Tom Paine during revolutionary times." Krassner highlights the mission he perceived for the magazine with two relevant quotes. First, from Malcolm Muggeridge: "Humor is an aspect of freedom without which it cannot exist at all. By its nature humor is anarchistic, and it may well be that those who seek to repress or limit laughter are more dangerous than all the subversive conspiracies which the FBI ever has or ever will uncover. Laughter, in fact, is the most effective of all subversive conspiracies, and it operates on *our* side." And from Groucho Marx : "Satire is *verboten* today. The restrictions — political, religious, and every other kind — have killed satire." Krassner's literate awareness, as well as the social critic–humorist combination, is highlighted by the Muggeridge–Marx blend, a mixture that characterized *The Realist*. As editor, Krassner enthusiastically headed for "an open field mined with taboos waiting to be exploded." He exploded them with a deft combination of social concern and humor, and with an extraordinary list of contributors and interviewees, including in the first few issues Albert Ellis, Madalyn Murray, Robert Anton Wilson, Alan Watts, and Lenny Bruce.

Krassner's friendship with Lenny Bruce, along with accounts of Bruce's performances and his running battle with the authorities, is especially absorbing. Lenny Bruce is, of course, a counter-culture saint, whose attacks on society's hypocrisy and skewed mores led to legal skirmishes that placed him on the front line of an ongoing censorship battle: freedom of speech versus obscenity. Krassner interweaves excerpts from Bruce's performances, conversations with Bruce, and revealing incidents. Consider Bruce's Chicago arrest, where the manager of the Gate of Horn was warned that the club's license was in danger and implied it was because Bruce mocked the pope. "And indeed the Gate of Horn's liquor license was suspended . . . . The only charge pressed by the city prosecutor was Lenny Bruce's allegedly obscene performance, and his trial had not yet been held. Chicago had the largest membership in the Catholic Church of any archdiocese in the country. Lenny Bruce's jury consisted entirely of Catholics. The judge was Catholic. The prosecutor and his assistant were Catholic. On Ash Wednesday, the judge removed the spot of ash from his forehead and told the bailiff to instruct the others to do likewise." The trial demonstrates the truth of Bruce's attacks on hypocritical piety, spotlighting such issues as separation of church and state and the right to a fair trial, as well. Could Kafka have imagined anything more outrageous or excessive? Krassner not only appreciated and supported Bruce, he learned from him. He had, in common with Lenny Bruce, an uncanny ability to expose the outrageous by implementing the outrageous.

The most famous — or infamous, depending upon one's perspective — moment in the publishing history of *The Realist* was Krassner's "The Parts Left Out of the

Kennedy Book," an episode of such importance that one of the book's twelve chapters is devoted exclusively to it. And rightly so. Krassner first tried to obtain actual parts omitted from William Manchester's *Death of a President*, and when he was unable to do so, he decided to write them himself. This he did, "by improvising on stories that White House correspondents knew to be true but which had remained unpublished, peeling off layer after layer of verisimilitude, getting closer and closer with each new paragraph to some unknown core at the center of this apocryphal onion." At the core was an incident provided by Marvin Garson's "stoned rap," the "astounding metaphorical truth" Krassner was looking for. This "truth" was Lyndon Johnson crouching over Kennedy's corpse on Air Force One, first "chuckling," then "breathing hard" as he performed sexual intercourse with the neck wound. Understandably, many people found the satire offensive. In fact, Krassner had to delay publication of the May 1967 issue two months while he searched for a printer willing to do the typesetting. "Even the company that printed the Communist *Daily Worker* turned down the job," Krassner writes, ever alert to the revealing detail. The morality of the hoax has been debated, but Krassner clearly views it as effectual satire in the tradition of Swift's *A Modest Proposal*. And like *A Modest Proposal*, the best gauge of its effectiveness is that its authenticity was accepted "even if only for a fleeting moment — by intelligent, literate people." Indeed, when the issue appeared, I pored over the piece with a colleague and we eventually concluded that it was a hoax. We thought we had found evidence in the following sentence: "His staff included a Secret Service agent, referred to by the code name *Dentist*, whose duties virtually centered around escorting to and from a rendezvous site — either in the District of Columbia or while traveling — the models, actresses and other strikingly attractive females chosen by the president for his not at all infrequent trysts." We concluded that Manchester, ever grammatically meticulous, would have written "centered on" or "revolved around" rather than "centered around." Krassner's measure of the piece's effectiveness is supported by the fact that our decision was made on a minor prose matter rather than the major issue of believability. Krassner accomplished his purpose: "to satirize certain things about the assassination — its aftermath, the hypocrisy, the exploitation, the cover-up, the quest for power."

The Realist was obviously on the cutting edge of cultural criticism, willing to take on any sacred cows, religious or political. Serious cultural historians could do worse than investigate *The Realist's* contribution to the current blurring of boundaries between popular culture and high culture, between politics and show business, between reality and media event. Consider, for example that Matt Groening, creator of *The Simpsons*, began reading *The Realist* at age 11. *The Simpsons* constantly exhibits brilliant understanding of media savvy as it dissects contemporary culture, including itself. Groening's satire is certainly in the tradition of Krassner.

Abbie Hoffman, too, revealed that he had been influenced by *The Realist*, and the Hoffman connection speaks to Krassner's fame as a Yippie. On December 31, 1967, in Abbie and Anita Hoffman's apartment Krassner came up with the Youth International Party, in order to give reporters "a *who* for their *who-what-when-where-and why* lead paragraphs." The motivation was the upcoming Democratic convention. "Yippie," Krassner observes, "was simply a label to describe a phenomenon that already existed — an organic coalition of psychedelic dropouts and political activists. There was no separation between our culture and our politics. We had come to realize that there was a linear connection between putting kids in prison for smoking marijuana in this country and burning them to death with napalm on the other side of the planet. It was just the logical extension of dehu-

manization." Krassner's account of the events leading up to the Chicago Convention of 1968, the convention itself, and the aftermath, including the conspiracy trial of the Chicago 7/8, is among the most informative and insightful in the book, demonstrating Krassner's media mastery and his ability to see the big picture. David Stahl, the mayor's assistant in Chicago asked Krassner what the Yippies were "really planning to do at the convention." Krassner asked if he had seen *Wild in the Streets*, in which young people put LSD in the water and take over the government. *"Wild in the Streets?"* Stahl repeated. "We've seen *Battle of Algiers*." As Krassner points out to the reader, "In *that* movie, a guerilla woman plants a bomb in an ice cream parlor, and the camera pans around to show the innocent faces of children who are about to be blown up." "What was to happen that summer, then, would be a clash between *our* mythology and *their* mythology." Such gems of Krassner's perception are spread throughout this book.

As Krassner implies, his life has been an ongoing attempt to debunk the dominant mythology, to unmask the establishment and show that its institutions were ultimately the source of an epistemology sustaining injustice, persecution, violence, and hypocrisy. He recounts his own growing awareness of that epistemology, how even though he thought of himself as "superconscious," when he learned, as an eighteen year old, that his girlfriend had dated a Negro, he asked if she had kissed him on the lips. He had "somehow absorbed this combination of racism and sexism by cultural osmosis. It was so incongruous with what I believed that by simply uttering those words out loud, I was able to start demystifying the implications of my prejudice." No wonder a process of disillusionment and awareness, even when painful, was central to his method. Racism was one byproduct of the epistemology of fifties America. Krassner tells how his father kept the Mafia from busting his print shop while the International Typographical Union succeeded, because it would not allow Negroes to become members and Krassner's father had a Negro assistant. Little wonder that he developed such a sharp sense of the incongruous juxtaposition, when institutions such as unions — created to protect the powerless — victimized the powerless. It is tempting, after reading *Confessions*, to see the rise of Conservative Republicans as an attempt to reinstate the dominant pre-sixties mythology. Indeed, the epistemological battle still rages.

The sheer number of the famous and the infamous, from culture and counter-culture, who have been a part of Krassner's life is remarkable. Consider that he worked for both Hugh Hefner and William Gaines on two of the most influential publications of this century. *Playboy* led a revolution not only in publishing but also in behavior, convincing a generation of Americans that sexual pleasure and sexual fantasy were normal and in the process shaking the foundations of a prudish nation. *Mad* was, for American youth of the fifties, the most effective satirical voice in America, and stood nearly alone as their refuge from fifties conformity. In fact, it is difficult to resist the temptation to attempt a summary of *Confessions* simply by uttering a litany of counter-culture celebrity: Hippies, Yippies, Diggers, Black Panthers, AIM, Further, Marx, Mailer, Manson, Milk, Owsley, Leary, Lennon, Lilly, Dylan, Kesey, Coyote. Krassner crossed paths with them all, and he was an integral part of cultural cross-pollinization.

Drugs were central to the sixties counter-culture, and drug use is a motif that runs throughout the book. One of the funniest and most fascinating anecdotes is Krassner's account of turning on Groucho Marx to LSD. The Krassner–Groucho connection is not as incongruous as it may seem at first glance, given the anarchic, anti-authority themes that characterize Marx Brothers movies. As Groucho asked

Krassner, "Do you realize that irreverence and reverence are the same *thing*?" "Always?" Krassner asked. "If they're not, then it's a misuse of your power to make them laugh," observed Groucho.

As with all aspects of the book, Krassner's approach to the drug culture is honest and inclusive. His description of his first acid trip is as detailed and informative as his history of the psychedelic revolution; he is a master of moving from the close-up, his own individual experience, to the panoramic view — how that experience fits into or is reflected by the culture itself. Krassner tells of sharing ayahuasca with his then 15-year-old daughter, Holly, during a "three-week expedition to Ecuador, focusing on shamans and healers." He tells, too, of being turned on to snorting heroin, getting sick and neglecting to feed his daughter's fish, Jaws and Lily, who subsequently died. When he eventually confessed his part in this tragedy, she remarked, in true Krassner family fashion, "That drug rehab guy *told* us that people would kill for heroin, but he didn't say that it would be *my goldfish*!" Though he refused to allow John Lennon and Yoko Ono to smoke cigarettes in his house, forcing them outside, he shared marijuana with them by his fireplace. Krassner is objective in his account of the drug scene, printing Yippie organizer Judy Clavir's comments at a twentieth anniversary conference of the mass protests at the 1968 Democratic convention: "We were very experimental with drugs, there's no question about it, and what we did not understand at the time was the nature of the disease of addiction." He also quotes Ken Kesey's distinction between "the organic, kinder, gentler hippie drugs" such as pot, mushrooms, LSD, psilocybin versus "drugs that make you greedy and produce criminals" such as cocaine and crack. In the sixties, "LSD was influencing music, painting, spirituality and the stock market. Tim Leary let me listen in on a call from a Wall Street broker thanking him for turning him onto acid because it gave him the courage to sell short." Krassner's mastery of the apt anecdote is rarely short of amazing.

The tone of *Confessions* is remarkably balanced. While Krassner points out some of Abbie Hoffman's peccadillos, such as his adamancy "about not being perceived as performing politically for financial gain," he allows Hoffman to comment on his own "sins." Krassner, during a conference on the infamous Chicago Democratic convention, referred to a debate between Jerry Rubin and Hoffman as "a Yippie event in and of itself, but it was also a Yuppie event since they were grossing five thousand bucks a throw." Hoffman was furious, and began shouting at Krassner, "That's not true!" It was true, but Hoffman had, in fact, persuaded Krassner to "drop that debate shit from your routine." When Hoffman accused him of being willing "for the sake of a public joke or a story to put in jeopardy the fragility of my life and friendship," Krassner's defense, contained in an apology, was that he just kept "blurring the line between friendship and culture chronicler." What may be seen by some as his moral weakness — blurring the line between friendship and chronicles — is also his great strength, for as a consequence his accounts are honest, detailed, and above all, trustworthy. He is daring enough to recount his own cuckoldry, his foibles as a husband, and his slide into borderline psychosis. In fact, Krassner's even-handed narration, with occasional forays into self-mockery, tends to obscure his unquestionable valor. Early in *The Realist* years, for example he became an "underground abortion referral service" almost by accident, unable to refuse "the scared female voices" who began to call him after he published an interview in *The Realist* with Dr. Robert Spencer, "a humane abortionist who was known as 'The Saint.'" "This was not some abstract cause far away — these were actual people in real distress right now — and I just couldn't say no." Krassner viewed *The Realist* as

ultimately humane, as a means of helping people, but his humane vision never remained abstract; it translated to the personal and immediate. With his *Playboy* salary he supported William Baird's free birth control clinic; a remedial reading program, the Neighborhood Pilot Project; and a judo center for disadvantaged youth. He provided a year's subsistence for George Von Hilsheimer so he could establish an American version of Humanitas. Through this organization, once it was established, he would also support a day-care center, a bail fund, and a "children's camp inspired by A.S. Neil's Summerhill School." Aid went to the arts, too: the San Francisco Mime Troupe and the Free Southern Theater, as well as a (pre-Lennon) Yoko Ono project. His support of Ono was providentially returned when he needed $5000 for a printer's advance — a conspiracy article by Mae Brussel having apparently spooked the printer into refusing the usual credit arrangement. To reconcile the man who was *The Realist* with the man who was a compassionate altruist, it is necessary only to trace Krassner's firm commitment to the individual which *Confessions* amply documents.

Though it is serious, the book is consistently funny. Krassner records his inability to refrain from uttering a punch line. Losing his virginity under a portrait of Alfred E. Neuman in *Mad Magazine*'s office, and being told by his lover not to worry about protection, Krassner couldn't resist a verbal ejaculation at the moment of crisis: "blurting out *What — Me Worry?*" Identified as "father of the underground press," his reaction was a punch line: "I demanded a paternity test." Asked by an interviewer, in the wake of the "Parts Left Out of the Kennedy Book" controversy, if he condoned necrophilia, he replied "Oh sure, but only between consenting adults."

Confessions covers such vast territory that an adequate summary is nearly impossible. This is a man who traveled to Egypt with The Grateful Dead, to Cuba to meet with Castro, and who was "a bundle of paradoxes as a performer" and as a person. "I was a hermit, yet I would go out to do shows and talk to a hundred people at once. I was a social critic, yet my spiritual path was trying not to judge others. Irreverence was my only sacred cow, yet I tried not to let victims become the target of my humor." The essential paradox at the heart of Krassner's being is illustrated by the fact that he could receive "the Feminist Party Media Workshop Award" from Flo Kennedy, yet he could also accept a job from Larry Flynt, "the nemesis of feminism," as editor of *Hustler*. Characteristically insightful, Krassner replied to the charge that *Hustler* exploited women by pointing out that "actually it was guilty of exploiting men's addiction to pornography." A staunch supporter of equality, pointing out in 1959 that want ads in newspapers classifying occupations by sex were morally wrong, Krassner found himself puzzled by the attitude of feminist friends years later. A representative anecdote recounts how his friend Robin Morgan declared in 1970 that Krassner "would no longer be welcome in her home unless I [Krassner] quit as film critic for *Cavalier*, because it was by definition a sexist magazine. I couldn't believe it. I was being purged from my own extended family. It was irrelevant that my column enabled me to support my daughter, or that Robin herself worked for Grove Press, which was considered to be a sexist publisher by many feminists."

The book contains some solutions to mysteries. For those who remember how "it quickly became public knowledge that you could get legally high by smoking dried banana skins" in the sixties, Krassner explains the origin. The editors of the *East Village Other* "were intrigued to learn that LSD released serotonin in the brain and wondered if it could be found in nonchemical substances. Mistaking *serotin*, which is found in bananas, for *serotonin*, they inadvertently launched the great banana

hoax." The *Berkeley Barb* printed the information, soon followed by mainstream periodicals. Such satisfying revelatory nuggets abound. One learns that the event which linked bra burning with the burgeoning feminist movement did not involve a burning bra, and learns why as well. Some bits are nearly beyond belief, such as the fact that Timothy Leary and Charles Manson occupied neighboring cells in prison. Krassner deals extensively with both Leary and Manson, pointing out that Manson was in reality far removed from the mainstream perception that he was a product of Hippie culture; he was, more accurately, a product of the old epistemology, having spent nearly all of his life in prisons.

Krassner is perceptive, and one reason he is perceptive is that he is honest. He does not shy away from, nor soften, what he sees no matter how painful. His honesty, especially when applied to himself, borders on the brutal, as when he describes an insane aunt and the events which unbalanced her mind, or when he recounts his sexual abuse first by a fellow camper then by the camp counselor he went to for help. If he thinks something influenced him, no matter how private, he reveals it: such as an uncomfortable flap of foreskin from his botched circumcision or his relatively late loss of virginity. Invariably, his "misadventures" lead to awareness, an awareness made possible by this honest self-appraisal "I would be particularly haunted by the memory of one night when Jeanne had awakened me. 'I was dreaming that you were being mean to me,' she said. I could have comforted her. We could have delved into the dream. Obviously it had importance for her — Jeanne's dreams were part of her reality — but all I said was, 'You woke me up to tell me *that*?' Thereby being mean to her and making her dream come true. I had wanted to liberate communication around the world, but I didn't even know how to talk with my own wife." Again and again Krassner demonstrates the inseparability of the personal and the universal, theory and practice, the abstract and the real.

While the book's core may be the sixties, Krassner has made it clear that he does not want to be "frozen" in that era, and he makes certain that *Confessions* connects with the present. He writes of Dukakis headquarters contacting him for jokes in a desperate effort to make their candidate seem spontaneous. "The only one-liner that Dukakis actually used in the final debate was, 'A flexible freeze — that sounds like an economic slurpie.' It fits right in with a presidential campaign of easily recognizable pop-culture references — Dukakis calling Bush 'the Joe Isuzu of politics,' Arnold Scwarzenegger belittling Dukakis as Pee Wee Herman, Bush referring one day to 'thirtysomething' and the next to Vanna White from 'Wheel of Fortune' as Vanna, thereby perpetuating his delusions of intimacy." Krassner astutely dissects contemporary society, from this campaign of pop-culture references to acceleration as a central characteristic of modern culture: "Even the rate of acceleration has been accelerating, and irreverence has been accelerating along with everything else. Although it took more than a decade after the assassination of John and Robert Kennedy for there to be a band called The Dead Kennedys, it took only a few months after the attempted assassination of Ronald Reagan for a group called Jodie Foster's Army." The counter-culture may have been more successful than it imagined; it sought change, and change may well be the primary characteristic of contemporary culture.

Confessions of a Raving Unconfined Nut: Misadventures in the Counter-Culture is a literate, informative, entertaining, and valuable account of one of the most volatile periods in American history. Krassner portrays the displacement of the governing epistemology in the sixties as well as the failure of any new epistemology to replace it. The result has been a blurring of cultures: politics fades into pop culture, show

business melds into politics, media events become reality. Certainly Krassner contributed to this condition.

If *Confessions* has one glaring weakness, it may well be its title. While "a raving, unconfined nut" does have significant origins — it comes from a fake letter sent by the F.B.I. to *Look* magazine in an attempt to discredit Krassner — it verges on the silly, coinciding with the establishment's misapprehension of Krassner as nothing more than a buffoon. The problem is that titles, unfortunate though it may be, do sell books and do predispose potential readers to pick up a book and browse through it. This title makes sense *after* one has read the book, but is surely exercises misdirection on potential readers. If *Confessions* is reprinted, it might benefit from a retitling. Certainly it is in the tradition of the autobiographical confession, from St. Augustine through Rousseau to DeQuincey and beyond. It is a solid contribution to this honorable genre. So, given the attention Krassner devotes to awareness and transformation, and considering that Alfred Schneider became the counter-culture's St. Lenny, perhaps this volume should dispense with modesty altogether, acknowledge Krassner's undoubted status as counter-culture holy man, and assume a more appropriate title: *The Confessions of St. Paul.*