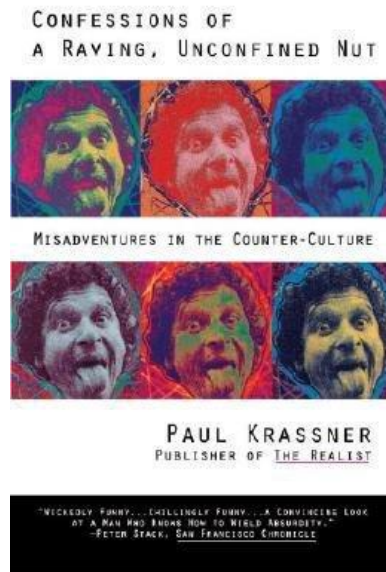


Misadventures in the Counter-Culture

By Mark Morelli, *The Cleveland Free Times* 1994



If I were in charge of publicity for Simon & Schuster, I'd send a Winston Churchill lookalike out to bookstores saying, "Never have so many owed so much to...Paul Krassner."

The Realist, a sharp satirical newspaper that Krassner first published in 1958, made the way for future underground papes, as well as *Laugh-In*, *National Lampoon*, *Doonesbury*, *Saturday Night Live*, *Spy*, Harry Shearer, and those thousands of cocky little self-published journals called 'zines. With comedy clubs, morning radio, dozens of cable stations, and office wise guys, there is so much humor out there it isn't funny. Krassner, along with the likes of Mort Sahl, Lenny Bruce and Shel Silverstein, was at the root of this scabrous new humor. Krassner has chronicled his riotous life and career in *Confessions of a Raving, Unconfined Nut* (Simon & Schuster.)

Among other things, it's an insider's look at the radical '60s. Krassner examines the decade not as one of its own celebrated youth (he was born in 1933) but as one of their playful older brothers who, doing things backwards, tagged along with the younger ones. He left college just three credits short of graduation and for years hung around New York's leftist fringe, writing and editing for liberal rags. But Krassner, who didn't drink, smoke or even take aspirin, opened up to a society that was rejecting old mores. His "firsts" are hilarious. He lost his virginity in the lobby of *Mad* magazine's offices. His first recreational drug use was LSD (his mother warned him that it might lead to pot.) He examines the

widespread introduction of drugs to American culture in his chapter "My Acid Trip with Groucho Marx." (Groucho acted out songs from the musical *Fanny*.) Krassner echoes the hopes at the time that psychedelic drugs would eliminate psychoses.

There is a wistful buoyancy to America's "turning on" in the '60s. Those first joints and trips for the baby boom generation must smack as nostalgic as sitting under the Andrews sisters' apple tree does for their parents. "I especially enjoyed tripping while being interviewed on TV," Krassner writes. "From a pot brownie for Mike Douglas to magic mushrooms for Tom Snyder. But those were the mid-'60s, joyfully devoid of crime and crack.

As they get older, satirists often tired of lampooning the world around them because the world actually one-ups them in madness. Late in his long career, Marx Brothers-era humorist S.J. Perelman found it more difficult to unravel a world that was unraveling like crazy on its own.

So try to imagine a less unraveled America of not-so-long ago where Paul Krassner tried to publish an article, excerpted from William Manchester's research that was never included in his book *Death of a President*, called "The Parts Left Out of the Kennedy Book." Part investigation, part bawdy and repulsive satire, it took *months* to find a willing printer to send it to press. It was finally published in May, 1967, nearly four years after JFK's assassination.

Krassner never did and still doesn't claim association to any party or faith. "Humor was my religion . . . thou shalt not take thyself too goddamned seriously." Part commentator, part vaudevillian, he conceived a FUCK COMMUNISM poster to confuse conservatives by simultaneously appealing and offending them. This make me moon nostalgic for the time when profanity packed a punch, when it wasn't so prevalent as to be monotonous.

Other chapters examine Lenny Bruce, whose brushes with indecency seem quaint in today's world of shock radio, gangsta rap, and cable TV. Another, the rise and fall of the Yippie empire and Krassner's involvement with the Chicago 8: At their 1970 conspiracy to riot trial, he dropped acid and remembers that Judge Julius Hoffman "looked exactly like Elmer Fudd."

Plopped in the middle of this political autobiography is a loving tribute to his daughter Holly, who grew up knee-high to Timothy Leary and Abbie Hoffman. Ever her father's daughter, she impishly once thought that Hare Krishnas were singing her name ("Holly Krassner! Holly Krassner!") Krassner's humor is

liberatrian and he'd rather offend than censor. "Irreverence was my only sacred cow." In short, he'd go for anything and try to pass it off as satire. But he did object to Abbie Hoffman's irresponsible Yippie slogan "Kill Your Parents." In this most warm chapter about his daughter, you know why. It is always a sweet touchstone in autobiographies when the subjects steps down from their place in history and talk about their children.

Krassner stopped publishing *The Realist* in 1974. He was less interested in being funny than in researching conspiracies. He is an avowed Kennedy assassination conspiracy nut. Speaking of nut, the title of the book comes from a poison pen letter written by an FBI agent who wanted it to ostensibly be a "reader" to Life magazine, who had just profiled Krassner. In 1985, he began to publish *The Realist* again following a stint as publisher of Larry Flynt's Hustler and other projects. Today, he's in demand a a stand-up comic/commentator, still in the pasture, nudging past competitors both dull and sharp, tipping over sacred cows.