I had trouble deciding whether or not to read *Indecision*. Sure, it received one of those weird, apparently positive reviews from Michiko Kakutani where she attempts to write in the voice of a literary character, in this case Holden Caulfield. Next, there was Jay McInerney, Mr. Eighties himself, lauding the book on the cover of the *New York Times Book Review*. Yet the whole idea of a generation-defining novel seemed passé. Who could believe in something like that anymore, in our hip-hop, globalized, multiethnic, broadband-ready world?

When I did read the book, I discovered that the author, Benjamin Kunkel, doesn’t really believe in generation-defining novels, either. But he’s written what might once have been called one. More specifically, he’s written a book that speaks to college-educated males of a certain questing persuasion. I felt a slight embarrassment reading the book in public. It was as if I were rushing a fraternity for sensitive guys, or sending out some lame signal: "Look, he’s trying to figure himself out." Eventually, I took off the dust jacket.

My squeamishness derived from my motives. Mostly I read for pleasure, but, when I am honest with myself, I realize that I am often looking for direction, a philosophy of life. In high school, I fell under the influence of Fitzgerald, Kerouac, Ford, and, forgive me, Ayn Rand. In college, I absorbed an idea that undid my previous easily gathered belief. Namely, that texts, religions, notions of success and the good life were all cultural constructions, the changeable and shaky foundations of our current historical moment. This had a corrosive effect: The constructed nature of everything made it hard to believe in anything.

To put it another way, I once had a straight-laced friend who started listening to the Grateful Dead. When was the moment that he ceased to be “my friend who was into the Dead” and became an actual Deadhead? I couldn’t understand how he plunged through the silly arbitrariness of lifestyle choice to actually change his life.

In *Indecision*, the novel’s 28-year-old protagonist, Dwight Wilmerding, expresses a more succinct version of the same thought.
It wasn't very unusual for me to lie awake at night feeling like a scrap of sociology blown into its designated corner of the world. But to know the clichés are clichés doesn't help you to escape them. You still have to go on experiencing your experience as if no one else has ever done it.

This passage comes early in the book, and it sets the stage for what follows: a novel that is not so much interested in the dramatic irony of being self-aware but in the reconstruction of belief that comes after it.

Irony has become one of those thoroughly annoying words, but let's return to 1991 when the concept in its contemporary, tonal incarnation was fairly fresh. Douglas Coupland's novel Generation X and Richard Linklater's movie Slacker distilled a mostly white, college-educated, upper-middle-class North American sensibility. It was partly a politicized worldview shared by the children of baby boomers who were disgusted with capitalism (the Iran-Contra scandal, El Salvador, Reaganism, Wall Street) but who also saw that the alternatives—communism and socialism—had flopped. The I-word came to represent an attitude of passive engagement at a recession-era moment, typified by the motto of Linklater's movie: "Withdrawing in disgust is not the same thing as apathy." An ironic stance toward America and its culture provided a space for novelty and pleasure, and, potentially, a sense of purpose.

Reading Indecision provided more than a touch of confusing déjà vu. Here we find a protagonist who is filled with the same types of beliefs that Coupland's characters had started out with, but who was young enough to have graduated during the boom of the '90s. It would seem that today, a group of (again, privileged, college-educated) people afloat on a sea of meritocratic possibility and dazed by 9/11 are finding a similar difficulty engaging with America. Dwight Wilmerding wants to be in earnest. He's searching for genuine gravity in his life, just like Coupland's characters. The plot device that drives the first half of the book is Dwight's decision to fly to Ecuador to see a girl he had a crush on in prep school, and to start taking an experimental drug called Abulinix that will cure his indecisiveness. When he arrives in Ecuador, the girl he came to see turns out to have an extremely attractive Belgian roommate named Brigid. Circumstance throws Dwight and Brigid together on a jungle tour, and, during these chapters, the book's mix of sexual tension and gratuitous philosophical dialogue is less Coupland than, well, Ayn Rand.

What Kunkel nails is the malleable mindset of the college-educated liberal arts major: "In my experience, when a person doesn't know what to do with himself, he will check his e-mail." He also circumvents the most annoying trait of indecisive characters—"if your life is such a muddle, then how are you writing this book?"—by making the composition of a memoir part of Dwight's drug-assisted decision-making spree. But the most ambitious element of Indecision is the way the novel does not withdraw in disgust, but rather embraces a social justice argument in its final chapters.

Completely high on some Ecuadorian drug, Brigid tells Dwight about an imaginary fruit:

When you eat from this fruit then whenever you put your hand on a product, a commodity, an article, then, at the moment of your touch, how this commodity came into your hands becomes plainly evident to you. Now there is no more mystification of labor, no more of a world in which the object arrives by magic—scrubbed, clean, no past, all of its history washed away.

By the end of Indecision, Dwight has declared himself a "democratic socialist" and lives in Bolivia, writing press releases on behalf of exploited workers. I like that Kunkel has written a novel about belief, and it's exciting to see someone in my peer group wrestling with such questions. But let's take a closer look at what, exactly, that belief constitutes.

For starters, it's striking that Dwight's conversion to socialism takes place in South America. Latin America is a place where socialism has had a long, tangled history and, pace Venezuela, the talk that circulates about the regions these days tends more toward free-trade agreements than Maoist rebels. Kunkel has Dwight nod toward socialism's complications, but he never makes the embrace seem more than a nostalgic pose. It's a moral pleasure to be a socialist (especially if you're living in a capitalist economy): The
hard part is to engage socialism as a rigorous, powerful, and fraught ideology. Dwight seems committed to his ethic of anti-consumerism, but what's less clear is how his passion for his cause translates into a viable intellectual framework for improving on the economic policies of our globalized world.

Granted, it's much more difficult to write a novel about a character embracing a belief system than a novel in which they cast beliefs aside. One of the people who successfully pulled it off, actually, is Ayn Rand, whose 1943 novel, *The Fountainhead*, launched the philosophy of objectivism, complete with campus objectivist clubs. Even so, Rand is hardly a subtle writer; her books are more like effective vessels for ideas. Kunkel is a much more nimble and perceptive novelist than Rand—less didactically monolithic—but beneath all the wit, *Indecision* suffers, in its second half, from the kind of speechifying one might find in a Rand novel, and I wonder if their writerly aspirations are all that far apart. There are plenty of hints in *Indecision* that Kunkel believes that a novel can spark a revolution. And, as a writer, he's just at the beginning of his career and influence. Explaining socialism to the postironic, ambivalent, hopeful, generous twentysomethings of 2005, I suppose, is what sequels are for.

**Related in Slate**


Michael Agger is a Slate associate editor. He can be reached at michael.agger@gmail.com.