

PREFACE

After the death of Charles (Chuck) Stenzel in a fraternity initiation ceremony, the then-president of Alfred University, M. Richard Rose, spoke at a memorial service. He said that no individual student could be blamed for the death in what Chuck's mother has called a senseless hazing incident. Rose ended his remarks with a quote from John 8:7— "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone."

When I was twelve I accidentally brought home from the library a book by Upton Sinclair called *The Jungle*. I say "accidentally" because I had been reading about the adventures of Frank Buck, and the title misled me. I thought *The Jungle* might be about Africa and safaris.

Reading about the horrible goings-on of the meat-packing industry upset me, terribly. But, when I closed the book, I concluded that the author had done something important by exposing what he had found. Once those particular evils in the workplace had been dealt with, American students stopped reading *The Jungle*. Today they know only its title, if that, and Upton Sinclair's name is forgotten by most. That is as it should be. The author's name isn't important; solving a social predicament is.

Just before I abandoned graduate studies at the University of Nevada-Reno in 1976, a young man named John Davies died in a hazing incident. The death appalled me. As a freelance writer one of the first articles I wrote was for the now-defunct magazine *Human Behavior*. The article was on fraternity deaths. Eileen Stevens, the mother of Chuck Stenzel and founder of the Committee to Halt Useless College Killings, read the piece and contacted me. We met once in a New York restaurant in 1979, talked, and went about our separate lives except for occasional notes at Christmas.

I was too inexperienced then to write a book on hazing. I wanted to learn first-hand about the American experience. For more than three years I lived out of my pickup truck as a freelance journalist for six to eight months at a stretch, writing magazine articles in KOA campground offices, in shabby hotel rooms in remote outposts, and in the houses of friends I had just met. To make a living as a freelancer, I began writing "puff" pieces—the "ten best roadhouse bars" and other tripe—and, whenever I could, solid and solemn journalism that went into my portfolio. Following my marriage in 1982, my writing projects were more in line with what my vision of journalism had been as a twelve-year-old: books for boys on steroids and recruiting evils; magazine articles on alcoholism, a basketball scandal, and one aging professor's battle to keep the moribund American chestnut from extinction.

To support my writing addiction, I began to teach college classes in which students read the books I had come to cherish: the nonfiction novels of Norman Mailer and Truman Capote; the literary journalism of John

McPhee, Richard Rhodes, Joan Didion, Mark Singer, and Tom Wolfe; the nonfiction books and essays of Harry Crews, Edward Abbey, Ted Conover, Thomas McGuane, and George Plimpton. Since I had never taken a creative writing or journalism class, I began interviewing authors whose work I admired. Their genre didn't matter. Their excellence is what drew me to them. These interviews with the likes of Kurt Vonnegut, James Dickey, John Jakes, David Mamet, Mark Steadman, William Least Heat Moon, Maurice Sendak, Crews, and Plimpton appeared in popular and little magazines. But the publication credits were a secondary reason for doing the interviews. Quite simply, I wanted to ask the best writers in America questions about writing that I couldn't answer on my own. In turn, I fed their answers to my college students.

My work as teacher and advisor brought me many warm relationships with my students, a good many of them fraternity and sorority members. Hence, the idea of this book came into my head and wouldn't go away. I received a grant from the Gannett Foundation to do preliminary research on hazing.

Broken Pledges is the result of my investigation of that subject, particularly—although hardly exclusively—as it exists in college fraternities. Hazing, I've discovered, is a common, hidden cancer in the nation's high schools, armed forces, clubs, sororities, and adult fraternal groups. It is a problem that demands more scrutiny than a single book can give it.

Upton Sinclair alone didn't attack the problems of the meat-packing industry. As a result of *The Jungle* public policymakers and watchdog journalists did the real work to eliminate the horrid practices. My hope is that this book is so successful that it soon becomes as forgotten as *The Jungle* is today. One book alone cannot eliminate hazing, but an informed public, press, military, and government can.

No, President Rose, I'm not without sin. I pledged Sigma Tau Rho fraternity at the State University College of New York at Buffalo and was initiated in 1965. I was hazed as a pledge; I hazed as a member. But the problem of hazing is too demeaning, widespread, and dangerous for even sinners to ignore. It shatters the lives of perpetrators, as well as those of victims and their families. It destroys the reputations of otherwise admirable institutions and administrators. I concluded, finally, that a former sinner might be best qualified to expose hazing abuses. Since slavery, no institution has so deserved to be ended.

Having said that, I hereby cast the first stone. I hope that this book gives other hazers and victims the courage to fire away.

—Hank Nuwer
Fogelsville, Pennsylvania

The call came in the middle of the night. Eileen Stevens's son was dead. She was alert and numb at once, her flesh no longer part of her. She wanted to hang up. She wanted the caller to stay on the line forever. She wanted to know what had happened and how. But most of all she wanted the call to be a dream, a very bad dream.

The pain in the caller's voice, the small break in his professional manner, revealed the truth, told her the worst had happened. She was ready to bargain with God. The devil. The caller himself: Take my life, my soul—take me. I've lived. But make it untrue. Take me, not Chuck.

But Chuck was dead.

She wandered through the house. A gong vibrated between her ears. She eyed the refrigerator. The freezer held the ingredients for chili. Chuck alone in her family loved it. Parents Weekend at Alfred University was approaching, and she had planned on taking him a special meal.

She went into his room. In the closet were the boots and skis she'd given him not two months earlier. He'd used them only once. She was glad she exceeded the budget to buy them. She could still hear his squeal of joy on Christmas morning. Twenty, he'd acted like a four-year-old. His joy was infectious; his hugs, genuine. If only she had kept hugging him forever, never let him go.

The caller's words roared like a waterfall in her mind. Chuck's "probable cause" of death was an overdose of alcohol, "at a party," the dean of students had said. He had also repeated that explanation to her husband, Roy, in a later call. But how was that possible? Sure, Chuck drank a few beers with his buddies, his fellow clammers on nearby Great South Bay, but he'd never had too many, to the best of her knowledge.

She wanted to leave immediately. But a winter storm had intensified, adding 3.4 inches of snow to the twenty-two already on the ground in Alfred. Flying into a commercial airport within a ninety-minute drive of New York's Southern Tier was going to be impossible until snowplows could do their work. She contemplated going by car, but Roy convinced her she would have to wait out the night.

A staunch Catholic, she spent the long night cradling her husband in her arms, taking comfort in her religion. Then the thought struck her. She'd have to ask if someone had summoned a priest to administer Extreme Unction, the sacrament her faith promised would permit her son straightways into heaven.

Little did she know that her boy's spiritual welfare was the last thing on the minds of those who shared his last hours. To the ghastly end, fraternity rites prevailed over last rites. And human rights.

