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NEWS & POLITICS

Shoot the Messenger

Travis Culley's new book extols the virtues of Chicago's couriers and bike activists. So why are some of them sniping?

by **John Greenfield**
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Travis Culley was getting strangled by a trucker last month in the middle of Halsted, on a warm and clear Friday afternoon. The driver, a young man with short blond hair, was an inch or two shorter than Culley but much more muscular. As they struggled on the asphalt, Culley's bicycle helmet was pulled behind his head, and the nylon strap tightened around his neck, pinning him to the pavement. His assailant climbed on top of him and began to throttle him with both hands. "I could not breathe," Culley recalls. "I'm looking up at his face turning red. All of his weight is on my neck. There's a blue sky behind him. I'm wondering if this guy's gonna kill me."

It would have been an untimely end for someone who's about to become the best-selling bike-messenger-author of all time.

Last week Villard Books, a division of Random House, put 30,000 copies of Culley's new book, *The Immortal Class: Bike Messengers and the Cult of Human Power,* in stores across the country. A memoir, it focuses on the nine months Culley spent as a courier in 1998, before he began writing. The story combines personal narrative with a wide-ranging discussion of the messenger industry, Chicago history, urban planning, and the anticar movement. For his efforts, Culley collected a $30,000 advance.

That a messenger could make that kind of money for a book about bike activism would be unthinkable to most downtown businesspeople, who rely on couriers to transport their important legal documents, boxes, and blueprints.

I first met Culley on a Critical Mass ride in the fall of 1997. Hundreds of bikers were meeting under the Picasso in Daley Plaza during the evening rush hour on the last Friday of every month.

Riding in procession, the bikers take over the streets, shouting probicycle slogans and passing out literature, encouraging bystanders to consider alternatives to driving. The loose affiliation of riders puts together other

happenings to promote the cause, from a winter cycling fashion show to the annual “Say No to the Auto Show” protest at McCormick Place.

On this ride, Culley was typically boisterous. The long hair he had back then rippled in the wind as he cruised gracefully around the swarm of bicycles and idling cars. He repeatedly bellowed: “Do you see us? We are on bicycles! So watch your mirrors and watch your doors!” I later learned he’d been injured in an accident–getting “doored” by a woman leaving a cab.

One of Critical Mass’s most controversial tactics is the “holdup,” when riders intentionally stop in the center of a busy intersection to disrupt traffic. I’ve never liked the practice–it only seems to anger drivers, alienating them from the message of the demonstration. That’s never bothered Culley. During these blockades, he took delight in holding his bike triumphantly over his head or skillfully balancing it on his chin as he hung out in the middle of the street.

I don’t remember this incident, but in The Immortal Class Culley describes standing in the middle of an intersection as a truck driver yelled and blared his horn.

“I thought, What if I don’t respond?” Culley writes. “What would that make me? Some kind of engineering obstruction? A malfunction? Would the driver get out and hunt me down or seek to punish me for assaulting his schedule? For tying up the tracks? Would he take or destroy my property? Would he kill me?

“I am a human being. I am not some machinist’s error. Let him do what he’s got to do.”

Chicago has one of North America’s largest courier populations, with more than 70 companies and hundreds of bike messengers. Receiving orders by two-way radio, cell phone, or pager, the cyclists crisscross the Loop, picking up and dropping off packages at high-rise office towers and loading docks. Most get paid 50 percent of the delivery charge, which increases with the weight, distance, and urgency of the order. As with cabdrivers, the commission system creates an incentive to move quickly and efficiently.

The need for speed in city traffic creates a risky situation–most veteran couriers have stories of bad accidents, totaled bicycles, and broken bones. Other drawbacks include fatigue, exposure to the elements, and a lack of sick pay and health insurance, since many couriers are independent contractors.

But the work does offer exercise, fresh air, and flexible hours. And due in part to its hazards, most Chicago couriers make a decent wage for their “unskilled” labor, between $10 and $15 an hour.

That’s why messengering has always been a tolerable day job for creative types: writer Henry Miller, singer Sade, comedian Janeane Garofalo, and songwriter Ron Sexsmith, for example, all worked in bicycle delivery. In cities across the country, couriers express themselves through messenger-themed magazines, art exhibits, and rock concerts.

Naturally couriers have become central players in the burgeoning bike activism movement. Around the world, cyclists are calling for a greater awareness of their right to the road and the bicycle's potential to reduce pollution and gridlock. Messengers fight the battle on a daily basis, because riding is also their livelihood. Many local couriers have become involved in groups like Critical Mass, the Chicagoland Bicycle Federation, and the Windy City Bike Messenger Association, which organizes rallies and concerts and publishes the local courier zine Dead Air.

But of all the artistic and politically active messengers in Chicago, Culley's the one making thousands of dollars from a book about courier life. At 27, he radiates confidence. A wiry five-foot-ten with chiseled features and a shock of sandy hair, he has the cocky charisma of a DC comic book hero. His everyday speech is lofty and his body language flamboyant. It's no wonder, since his background is in theater.

In the introduction to The Immortal Class, Culley delivers a messenger-activist manifesto with his characteristic flair for drama:

"The bicycle is a revolution, an assault on civilian territory, intent upon taking, from the ground, responsibility for the shape of our cities. It is a mutiny, challenging the ever-one-way street. The bicycle is a philosophy, a way of life, and I am using it like a hammer to change the world and to redeem our war-torn cities."

Culley's exuberance gives his agent, John Ware, high hopes for the book. Ware also represents Jon Krakauer, author of the 1997 best-seller Into Thin Air. "I've been an agent for 24 years," he says. "I think there are a couple things working for Travis's book. It's unique in terms of its content. Then there's the substantive message of the book. And the very role of bike messenger is resonating nowadays. In a modern era where there are not many urban heroes there is something heroic about the bike messenger that is old-fashioned, with shades of the Pony Express. You throw Travis and his enthusiasm into the mix, and I think people are going to be fascinated. I think we're going to get good reviews and a lot of reviews."

The Immortal Class promises to be the most widely read nonfiction account of messenger life to date. But there have been many fanciful portrayals of courier culture. The 1986 action film Quicksilver starred Kevin Bacon as a New York stock trader who falls from grace to become a lowly bike jockey. A short-lived 1994 TV sitcom called Double Rush tried to re-create the success of Taxi in a bike-messenger setting. William Gibson's best-selling novel of that same year, Virtual Light, features a thieving female biker, while the hero of Joe Quirk's 1998 thriller, The Ultimate Rush, is a gonzo courier. But the most enduring pop-culture image of the messenger has to be Puck, the misanthropic San Francisco biker from MTV's The Real World.

In recent years there's been a spate of more realistic depictions of bike messenger culture. National Geographic filmed a documentary called Wheels of Fire about the 1998 Cycle Messenger World Championships, where courier teams from around the globe converged on Washington, D.C. Last year Kyle Shepard published Bicycle Messenger, a coffee-table book of black-and-white photos. Messenger, Messenger by Robert Burleigh is aimed at children ages four to eight.

Nerves of Steel, self-published last year by D.C. courier Rebecca "Lambchop" Reilly, is probably the closest to Culley's book. Using as a framework the story of Reilly's eight years of messenger work in nine cities–she spent three months in Chicago during the dead of winter–Nerves of Steel includes a series of interviews with the couriers she met along the way as well as a history of messengers, from the ancient Greeks to the Pony Express to the present. Only 1,000 copies were printed and many of these have gone to other messengers.

In contrast, The Immortal Class will get the full benefit of Villard's publicity machine. Ads will run in alternative papers, and brief write-ups have appeared in magazines ranging from Chicago to Outside to Spin. Both the Italian- and German-language rights have already been sold.

The book has been named as one of Barnes & Noble's Discover New Writers selections. Every season a panel of Barnes & Noble staff and other writers picks 15 to 25 "outstanding" works by new authors, usually fiction, according to Nicholas Bettress, manager of the chain's Lincoln Park store. "His book will be featured prominently in a special showcase at the front of the store with other first-time authors," says Bettress. "They will be in every Barnes & Noble in the U.S., about 600 stores, and on the Internet."

Villard's mailed 2,500 advance copies to reviewers, chains, and independent bookstores. The Immortal Class received starred reviews in Library Journal and Booklist, praising it for strong writing and unusual subject matter. A book tour, originally planned for Chicago, Philadelphia, New York, and San Francisco, has been expanded to include Seattle, Portland, Eugene, and Washington, D.C., because of the positive response, says Villard's publicity manager, Brian McLendon.

If it's successful, The Immortal Class could redefine the public image of couriers and draw national attention to Chicago's community of messengers and bike advocates, many of whom appear by name in its pages. But not everybody in that community is happy about the book.

Culley says cycling is in his blood: His grandfather founded the Fox Firestone Bike Shop in New Smyrna Beach, Florida, in 1956. Culley grew up about 250 miles south, in the Miami area. His father, a banker and broker by trade, had his own marketing company, while his mother was a social worker at a health clinic.

"We flirted with being middle-class," Culley says. "We had a big house and boat that we got cheaply. It was a scraped-together middle-class background."

Culley writes that his father was ashamed of their modest means and avoided interacting with his two sons: "He hid away like a piece of furniture, watching the ball game on TV and eating Cheeze-Its from the box. His problems seemed heavy and hard to bear." Culley's parents separated when he was 14.

Two years later, Culley says, he ran away from home, initially living out of a gold Chevy Caprice Classic, a gift from his grandmother. He writes that he survived this period by working as a busboy and eating leftovers off the dirty plates.

“It wasn’t until 16 that I succeeded,” he says. Youth theater spotlighted his acting talent, which, despite his poor academic skills, won him a scholarship to Miami’s New World School of the Arts, a combination high school and college modeled after the New York High School of Performing Arts. “That’s where I started to get behind books and really read them.”

Culley earned a BFA in theater and moved to Chicago with his girlfriend at the time, a painter. He found work as a freelance art installer for various galleries in River North, but his subsequent bike accident left him badly injured and unable to work. He formed a small theater company called the Finite Space and directed its production of Goethe’s Iphigenia in Tauris at Chicago Dramatists Workshop (he also played the role of Orestes). The play was financed with Culley’s credit card, and when the show failed he took on a series of odd jobs, from bookseller to mover to carpenter’s assistant. By September 1997 he was working as a leasing agent at a storage warehouse near the Merchandise Mart.

In The Immortal Class, Culley traces his bicycle activism back to his initial ride with Critical Mass. That December he curated the first Critical Mass art show, titled “Autogeddon: A Critical Response to Car Culture,” at Lineage Gallery in River North. Deciding once again to focus on theater, Culley quit his warehouse job. His main source of income during this time was a one-day-a-week job as an art installer at the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum. He writes that he quickly found himself insolvent, hungry, and faced with eviction.

In desperation, he answered an ad to bike for Joey’s, a mom-and-pop messenger service. Disgusted at risking his life for low pay, he decided to move up to Service First, a busier company where he could make good money.

Learning the ropes quickly, Culley soon became “indispensable.” Fighting exhaustion and intermittent knee pain, he persevered through a harrowing summer at the understaffed company, doing more than his share of work and collecting large commission checks. Near the end of his short tour of duty, he won his first “alleycat,” or illegal on-street messenger race. Thrilled by the experience, he began to think about putting together a book on courier culture.

In early 1999 Culley started recruiting contributors for the book, which he conceived as an anthology. He would edit the various submissions and write the remainder himself.

I was one of five contributors he enlisted. I’d been a bike messenger on and off for a total of four years. My section would describe my experiences as an editor of Dead Air, organizing messenger races, and booking concerts with courier bands. I also wrote about my arrest for impersonating a police officer because I rode in Critical Mass with a Chicago police patch sewn on my bag.

Donny “Quixote” Perry, a former leader of the Windy City Bike Messenger Association, would write about his childhood fixation with the movie Quicksilver. Jeff Benjamin from Velocity Courier would write about the

difficulties of working during the winter, and Jim Redd, an elder statesman of Critical Mass, would contribute a chapter about the movement.

Interested in including a female perspective, Culley sent an E-mail to Rebecca Reilly, who had been working for many years on her own book. Reilly says she was put off by Culley's forwardness in proposing a collaboration with someone he had not met in person. "The way he treated me was very disrespectful," she says. "He wanted me to share my work and he didn't even know me yet."

"I didn't want to consume her book," counters Culley. "I wanted to open up a discussion and see if she was interested in contributing a chapter. But she didn't seem interested. She gave me the cold shoulder." He eventually recruited Kim Morris from Service First to contribute the female voice.

That spring Culley sent proposals to several agents, and John Ware took on the project. "John had been a strong advocate of the book," Culley says. "It's not about the book being a big moneymaker, but he stands behind the ideas of the book. He cares about the cause: the future of cities and the ecology."

Soon after Culley signed with Ware, the road-rage murder of Tom McBride on April 26, 1999, rocked the cycling community. McBride had worked for eight years as a courier and was well-known among veteran messengers. According to witnesses, he had an altercation with the driver of a Chevy Tahoe on the west side while cycling in to work. He was struck several times, run over, and killed. Austin resident Carnell Fitzpatrick turned himself in to the police after his license plate was found under McBride's body. Jodee Sargeant, spokesperson for the Cook County state's attorney's office, says Fitzpatrick has been charged with first-degree murder and has a court date on April 10.

Culley didn't know McBride well, but he says he was deeply affected by the story of his death. He attended the wake. As recounted in The Immortal Class, McBride's parents were "surprised by how many messengers were there. It seemed clear to them now that Tommy was not just a rebellious kid. He was part of something. He'd shown that he could work hard and that he could make that experience work for him. He'd developed strong bonds with many different kinds of people here. In the industry and in this room, regardless of color or background, we were truly a family."

Culley decided to reconstruct the events leading up to McBride's death and end the book with a description of a memorial ride, organized by riders from Critical Mass, in which scores of cyclists returned to the scene to hold a vigil while sitting down in the middle of the street.

He contacted the McBride family several times for background information. "I gave Travis honest and straightforward answers," says Tom's father, Robert McBride Sr. "Most of it was about who my son was."

"Tom's folks have been grateful and supportive," Culley says. "They gave me the freedom to write as I wish and gave me photos of him." He said the family has been impressed by the response from the messenger

community, which included dedicating last year's messenger championships in Philadelphia to McBride's memory.

Though he hasn't seen Culley's book yet, Robert McBride Sr. hopes it will have a positive impact. "If it brings attention to road rage and bike messengers, that will be a good thing."

According to Culley, better public-transportation policy might have prevented the killing. McBride lived in Oak Park and drove into the city to messenger. When his car battery died, he would have taken the CTA Green Line to work if he had the choice, but he wasn't allowed to bring his bicycle on the train (bikes are allowed on the el–two in each train car–on weekends only). "So he was forced to ride his bike into town through neighborhoods that don't see many cyclists," Culley explains. "That says a lot about car culture."

By June of 1999, Culley was rushing to complete his anthology proposal, so he could send it to Ware before following a physician girlfriend to Philadelphia. Donny "Quixote" Perry's chapter about Kevin Bacon was the only piece that Culley felt would be ready in time. During the month before he mailed the proposal, he called Perry several times a week to check on his progress. At this point, Benjamin, Morris, Redd, and I were still to be included in the final product, though our chapters would not be part of the initial submission.

Culley mailed the proposal to John Ware before leaving on vacation to Europe for a few weeks in mid-June. In Amsterdam he received word from Ware that not one of the 25 publishers contacted was interested in the anthology idea. Some, however, were asking for a memoir. Simon and Schuster eventually offered a $20,000 advance, but Culley felt that wouldn't be enough to live on while writing the book.

Abandoning the anthology project, he started working on another proposal for a memoir. He briefly returned to Chicago before moving on to Philadelphia, but most of his former collaborators would not get word that the anthology was off until he came back to town more than a year later, in the fall of 2000.

"When I found out it had to be a memoir, it was one of the biggest problems of my life," Culley says. "I did not know I had a book at that point–there was no certainty anywhere. If it was going to be a memoir, I was committing to the hardest work I ever imagined, so I shut down everything to focus on that."

Soon after Culley moved to Philadelphia on June 30, 1999, Villard offered him $30,000, "the minimum of what I would need to write the book," Culley says. He accepted.

Not long afterward, he contacted Jim Redd to tell him the anthology project was off. "There was a phone conversation and he mentioned the advance and that it was going to be a one-person thing," recalls Redd, who says he wasn't too disappointed. "It didn't seem like an anthology would be marketed–it's easier to sell a book by a single author. And I was never in it for the money anyway." Redd then passed on the information to me at a Critical Mass ride.

Culley and I never really saw eye to eye on the project. I disagreed with his notion that all messengers enter the business because they have absolutely no other options, and he wanted me to make my story more heroic and dramatic. Slow to revise my piece to fit his vision, I doubted I would be in the final book. When I got the news that he'd landed the deal for a memoir, not an anthology, it was a relief to learn I had not missed out on an opportunity. I was impressed by–if a little envious of–his achievement.

A few months later Culley sent me an E-mail about his memoir project, and I congratulated him.

But Morris, Benjamin, and Perry had no communication with Culley until he returned to Chicago. Morris declined to comment, but Benjamin and Perry said they were angered that Culley left town with their chapters and never notified them of his memoir deal. They eventually got word of his contract from other people.

Benjamin says that last fall he asked Culley not to use anything from his chapter: "It seemed like he was going to milk other people's work for his own memoirs."

Benjamin has reviewed The Immortal Class for "XXXposure," the newsletter of a local racing team. He points out that a story from his winter biking manuscript shows up in Culley's book. Here's the version in Benjamin's original chapter:

"I was weaving my way through the stopped traffic when a white SUV swerved into me, pinning my handlebars between its left front bumper and the door of another car. My hands were trapped in there. The driver opened his door and leaned his head out; he looked like the son of a politician, from his bomber jacket to his perfect teeth to his Barbie-doll girlfriend in the passenger seat. 'Yeah?' he said. "Whaddya gonna do now, tough guy?' I knew the proper response. I would kick the door shut on his head, maybe bloody it up a little. Then I would smash his front windshield with my U-lock. A very simple plan. But when I tried to pull my bike free, I noticed that my arms were limp. I'd forgotten to eat lunch; suddenly I barely had enough strength to stand. When I finally got the bike free, I wheeled it to the sidewalk, completely spent."

The Immortal Class does not reveal that the story came from Benjamin's manuscript. Instead the book describes a half-frozen Benjamin telling the tale to Culley just hours after the incident, as they straddle their bikes outside the Velocity office:

"Jeff, Number Forty-six, told me that a guy in a white SUV hit him intentionally. The driver got out of the car and started talking shit and getting in his face: 'Whatcha gonna do about it, tough guy?' In an average situation, Jeff would have been smashing windows in with his U-lock and dragging the guy down the street by the collar, but it was about 10 degrees and it was a Friday. Half the staff at Velocity had disappeared, ducked out, or had been seriously injured in the last week. Jeff, usually in a team of twenty, was doing a quarter of the work on the board. 'Whatcha gonna do, messenger man?' The guy advanced. Jeff realized that if he spared this guy a moment of his energy, he would not be able to complete the day's work. He dropped his head, pulled his bike from between the truck and a parked car, and walked away to a good section of road, where he could mount up again. He said nothing. He just continued his work."

Perry notes that a similar vignette from his chapter–about being struck by an SUV, then doused with coffee–also shows up in The Immortal Class. “He got my story and inserted himself as the narrator,” Perry says.

“Donny thought I had taken his work and was going to plagiarize it,” says Culley. “Sorry to disappoint him–I didn’t.”

“It’s not plagiarism, but it is very shady,” Perry responds. “Travis did not let me and a few other contributors know the progress of the book, and what direction it was heading, and what format, and that’s what drove my speculation.

“It was very upsetting for me to have someone drive me to do a piece, more or less promise the results that the piece would get, receive a book deal, and then never speak to me again.”

John Ware was surprised to hear that most of the contributors got no word from Culley for more than a year. He stresses it wasn’t Culley’s fault that publishers weren’t interested in the anthology. “I think of Travis as such a stand-up guy. I cannot imagine why he waited so long to break the news because it was so uncontroversial. To impart this information would not have been fun, but he had done nothing to injure the people who were involved.”

“Perhaps I should’ve contacted them,” Culley says. “It was inconsiderate of me not to let people know exactly what was going on at the time, but I was under more pressure than I’d ever experienced in my life. I was just petrified at the idea of writing a memoir. If my head were on straight, I would have let them know what was going on, but I was really confounded at the problem of having to write this book.

“I just dropped it because no one seemed that interested in the first place,” he adds. “I thought it was good for them that I got out of their hair. It seemed that everybody would be delighted to hear it didn’t work out–I really thought they wanted the thing to crumble. I don’t think that’s reason to take aim at my success.”

He admits that he didn’t bother to contact his former partners because he never planned to return to Chicago. He intended to move with his girlfriend from Philadelphia to Cambridge, Massachusetts, but his plans changed when the relationship ended in the summer of 2000. “I’m glad I returned to Chicago, but I wasn’t planning on it,” he says. “Life is like that–it just changes its course.”

Culley says he would like to mend fences–he thanks Benjamin and Perry in the acknowledgments. “I would appreciate their forgiveness and understanding for my absence,” he says. “That would mean a lot to me.”

Critical Mass rider Eric Anderson helped edit Culley’s writing in the early stages of the anthology project. He says he hopes the biking community will not be divided by the book. “I was there from the beginning and I know that Travis wanted to write a book that would draw a lot of attention to bicycle issues,” Anderson says. “If he wanted to get his message out he had to get it out as a memoir. Despite the fact that I did a huge amount

of work that I won't get paid for, I don't feel ripped off. I appreciate what he tried to do in the book. I think it has the potential to show points of commonality instead of divisiveness."

After delivering the final draft of his book to Villard's New York office in August 2000, Culley returned to Philadelphia in time for the Cycle Messenger World Championships on Labor Day weekend. There he met Rebecca Reilly in person. By then she had copies of Nerves of Steel for sale.

"He proceeded to tell me how to market my book," she says. "I thought that was pretty condescending. I wasn't looking for advice, and he's full of advice. He has a style and I have a style and they kind of don't go together."

Culley says he was only trying to support her effort. "By that time I knew something about publishing and said I'd be happy to help. She said, 'I don't have time for this discussion.' So she was closed to me from the start. I don't see any antagonism between us, and I still think she could do a tremendous job in marketing her book. I'd love to see it succeed on the highest level. I think there's a need for a book on the female messenger experience. But I don't think her book was quite ready."

Reilly encountered the same obstacles as Culley when she tried to get publishers interested in an anthology about messengers. "The publishing houses wanted it to be one person writing," she says. "They told me a memoir would be easier to sell, and a publisher's main concern is selling books–it's not a charity.

"But from the beginning my intent was to capture the stories and the culture and kind of take a snapshot of messenger life. I felt it was important that many voices were in the book, not just mine. It was truly a labor of love. It's all about an industry I love and people I love."

"I'm sorry if she feels that there's some great victory in self-publishing," says Culley.

"When I heard he got the advance, I knew it would be a bigger book," Reilly says. "It might get more publicity and sales, but that's immaterial. This is an archive, so that in different cities people can say, 'I know that guy–I worked with him.' Sometimes being successful doesn't mean being big. Whatever he's got coming his way, good on him, and whatever I've got coming my way, good on me."

After the Philadelphia championships, Culley moved back to Chicago, just in time for "Break the Gridlock," an alternative transportation conference organized by riders from Critical Mass. "I could have gone anywhere," Culley says, "but I decided to stand behind the book and the city.

"I was dead broke," he says, noting that the advance–paid in installments, with taxes and his agent's fee taken out–barely covered his living expenses while he wrote. Unable to afford an apartment, he resumed messengering at Service First and couch surfed for several weeks, until he had saved up a few paychecks. During this time he supplemented his income with donations he received while dispensing advice, Lucy Van

Pelt-style, on busy street corners. Neil Steinberg wrote an amused column in the Sun-Times about Culley's cottage industry. But with the onset of winter, Culley closed down the advice stand and he's been a bike messenger at Service First ever since.

Last fall Culley received advance copies of The Immortal Class and passed them along to a few bikers. The books then made the rounds among other messengers. At 324 pages, The Immortal Class tells Culley's story in a roundabout manner, weaving together various anecdotes and philosophical musings.

In the introduction, Culley states his objective. Standing next to a newspaper box across the street from Daley Plaza after a busy day's work, he asserts his right to give his own perspective on the state of the "USA Today":

"I don't have the degrees from the old universities to call me an authority on urban development, but I do have this: I have the question and I have the city to relate it to….For the spectacle and the injustice that gives this place its edge, I've got one of the best seats in the house."

Meanwhile, Critical Mass is assembling under the Picasso. Culley refers to the bike activists as part of "the cult of human power that is reclaiming public space and giving it back to average people."

Next he depicts the ups and downs of a messenger's typical day. He sees a coworker frantically return to base after smashing a cab window and notes the importance of attitude in making it through the challenges of the job. He claims that to survive as a courier one must imagine oneself immune to the conventional rules:

"You become part of a class who, in order to continue, must believe itself unstoppable. This heightened feeling gives the messenger a confidence, a speed and agility of almost metaphysical proportions. We cling to the dream of being untouchable, part of an immortal class of winged angels, hailed for speed and strength."

The chapter "Freedom in the American City" alternates scenes of Culley getting trapped in the basement of the American Dental Association with flashbacks to his childhood in Florida. He tells of his youthful friendship with a heroin-addict neighbor who taught him that he should follow his bliss as long as he didn't hurt anyone. Culley writes that this live-and-let-live philosophy shaped his worldview:

"There are many ugly things about our world today and there are many ugly things about the city that I live in. The one defense that allows me to move easily through a society this diverse, that forcefield, is respect. To move forward, to act upon my freedom, and to make a living, I must respect the things I don't understand."

Reporting to work for his first biking job, Culley feels like an animal being led into a coliseum:

"Mentally, I was preparing myself for the worst as, perhaps, even the bull does. Knowing that he is powerless in the arena, he wastes no energy trying to prove it. He doesn't feign weakness. He doesn't give in or beg for

mercy. The bull has no escape and, appropriately, no escape reflex. He charges. He uses his horns. They are his one defense."

Descriptions of daily hazards and confrontations with drivers are framed by the image of messengers gracefully balancing on their bikes in a moonlit competition. He compares his surreal struggles with psychotic drivers to the couriers' attempts to stay on a bike with no hands and only one foot:

"Like them, I was attempting the impossible, and the full effect of this was only starting to become clear."

He goes on to justify fast, daring, and illegal riding by messengers:

"What the driving public needs to understand is that speed is what we are paid for and floating is the skill that makes our work competitive. We can twist Madison Avenue into a runway and penetrate a crowd like it was a puff of smoke. There is no fear. These kinds of stunts come directly from our experience, and that experience should be trusted. An intersection burnt by a courier should herald cheers from cops, motorists and pedestrians alike. It is the clearest expression of a messenger's technique."

A delivery to the modern-day offices of Burnham Architects leads Culley into a meditation on Daniel Burnham's City Beautiful vision for Chicago–with generous parks and boulevards, wide sidewalks for pedestrians, paved roads for bicycles–and its subsequent betrayal by the car culture. He ponders the constant movement of people and vehicles and contrasts the hush of his cousin's home in rural Dixon with the deafening roar of the el. He stands on the roof of his apartment building late one night and looks out on the dehumanizing effects of the automobile and capitalism on the urban landscape. "This is why the city is violent….The city itself has been taken from us."

He personifies this evil as "The Spirit of the Place" and then he addresses the "ghost":

"I saw his face glowing through the skyscrapers and lying out upon the flatlands of sprawling suburbs. Staring deep into his empty sockets, I told him the simple words: I hope we can reach an understanding. I am from this place. I belong here. I will not serve in your war."

He describes his harrowing month on the job with a knee injury in "Between the Cliff and the Bank." At the end of the chapter, Culley's knee freezes and he's rescued by a car messenger. Back at the office, he's summoned by the boss, who announces that he's become the highest-earning biker in the history of the company.

Culley's knee apparently got better soon afterward, because he goes on to describe winning his first messenger race. His high-speed account of triumphing over more seasoned competitors finishes on a contemplative note–he feels a new camaraderie with this motley crew of messengers but realizes that their subculture is largely invisible to the rest of society:

“As we sat in a circle and enjoyed the sunrise, we were of a single spirit, not for the pains that we had all endured but for the love we shared, the strength we felt, and the spirit we celebrated in the underground domain of urban cycling. Riding away that morning, the sun now high overhead, I felt a little sadness knowing that this victory would fall quietly on the world.”

The last quarter of the book focuses mostly on biker rights and urban planning issues. He describes Jon Boub’s bicycle crash on a faulty Du Page County bridge and the ensuing verdict in Boub v. Wayne Township, which cleared the local government of responsibility, reasoning that cars are “intended” users of roads while bicycles are merely “permitted.” Culley is outraged: “The Boub case shows us the state of our current road system, which exercises only the rights of motorists.” He goes on to describe police ambushes of Critical Mass rides in the aftermath of the trial and the bikers’ growing sense of disenfranchisement.

“Requiem for the Working Man” covers the author’s exit from messenger life and the winter of 1998-’99, described as a period of estrangement between couriers and bike commuters that ended with Tom McBride’s death. Culley writes that he and the messengers at the wake sensed their own mortality and vowed to make a positive difference in the world, realizing “we are not immortal, but…we are of a class that will never die. We live on together, Tommy and all who have fought for the protection of our common spaces, the safety of our streets, and the well-being of the very world that discounts us.”

In the closing chapter, “The Remains of Public Space,” the desolation and poverty of the city depresses Culley as he participates in the memorial ride through the west side to the site of McBride’s death. He argues that the automobile has isolated us from each other, leading to segregation by race and class and making our society less democratic:

“The private car, being ideologically antiurban, has reinforced the poverty of the past hundred years by separating our communities and steamrolling our commons. The car protects the public from public space–the last frontier where our ideas can be openly challenged and improved upon, where–forget happiness–democracy can be actively pursued.”

On the way back from the vigil, Culley notices new construction that suggests suburbanites are moving back to the city. He interprets this as cause for optimism. Back once again at Daley Plaza, he gazes at the city’s majestic skyline and vows to make Chicago a better place through bike advocacy:

“I, and many of these other riders–messengers and commuters alike–have inherited her conviction to survive, to stand out, and to succeed. For the bicycle and for the culture that supports it, we are helping to give the city a resurrection, a second coming of the city beautiful, a second chance at really working.”

Cyclists who’ve read The Immortal Class–and messengers who appear as characters in the book–hold differing opinions about its value, both as a history of events and as a work of literature.

One point of contention is Culley's fitness to write the first big bike-messenger memoir after spending only nine months on the job.

"People say I haven't paid my dues as a messenger, but I don't pretend to be an authority on the subject," Culley says. "Some of them want to believe it's noble to remain a messenger. They can criticize me, but to me messengering is a transient job for transient minds."

But "Captain" Jack Blackfelt, a former Dead Air editor who now messengers in New York, believes Culley's inexperience was a liability. "Much to his chagrin, I'm of the opinion that Travis wasn't in the industry long enough to write a book about it. I like his philosophy, but he sounds a little naive."

Marcus Moore, the messenger-mechanic who organized the book's "alleycat" race, didn't have the same problem. "He's a writer–I don't think his lack of experience should negate his book." And another Dead Air editor, James "Jimbo" Daniels, praises Culley's messenger ability. "He's a good athlete and he's fast. I remember he could pull off some serious work in a day and he pulled down some major cash."

Yet Donny "Quixote" Perry argues that Culley is a poor spokesman for bike messengers. "If there was a person who worked as a social worker for less than a year, or a doctor or a lawyer, would you expect them to be one of the best representatives for their profession in the country?" he asks. "The story may read well for some people as a realistic picture of the messenger community. But I know Travis as a person and I have complete faith that he used the community as a stepping-stone to further his career rather than to tell the story of an amazing culture. I think Travis, and this comes through in his writing, is one of the most egotistical and bombastic people that I have ever met. I'm disappointed with myself for not seeing that sooner and I think the messenger community and the literary community would be better off without him."

The book's accuracy is also a matter of dispute.

"He took some artistic license with some things," observes Jim Redd, citing a passage that has Redd U-locking his neck to his bike as a civil-disobedience strategy. "That's not factually correct, but it captures the spirit of what we were doing back in those days."

David Knol, a dispatcher at Service First, praised the book's true-to-life style. "It's not glossy–it's a real look at bike messengers." He verifies the scene where Culley is rescued after his knee gives out. "That's just the way it was. It was so cool the way he told the story."

Likewise, Service First messenger Patrick Ingram was impressed by the fidelity of the anecdote in which he returns to base after smashing a cab window. "I remember the incident. He had the dialogue word for word. The scene is a little embarrassing, but, hey, that's the way it was. It was true of my personality. It didn't make me look too bad. It didn't make me look like a god–just a normal human being with a short fuse."

Another coworker, Rod Richardson, chuckled over the following:

“I had been booking for the company more than three hundred dollars a day for the past six weeks. That’s not called doing a job. That’s called being a rock star. While Sammy Sosa and Mark McGwire were out-slugging each other over Roger Maris’ home-run record, the Punk, Number Thirty-three, and I were leap-frogging each other for the company record. I had taken down sixty-eight packages on a Wednesday only to see Sam hit seventy-one that Friday.”

“Every time he tells that story the numbers get bigger,” scoffs Richardson, who has a reputation for speed and wage-earning ability. “But he was one of the hardest-working messengers out there. There’s a special group of people in the zone. Once you’re doing 50 or 60 runs, or 70 miles during the day, you know you’re out there.”

Culley writes of meeting a female Velocity courier on Lower Wacker Drive as they cycle past half-naked homeless men. That courier says the encounter never happened.

The quality of the writing has also garnered mixed reviews.

“I’m writer enough for the story and I’m passionate enough for the purpose,” asserts Culley.

Marcus Moore agrees. “It flowed well, it was easy to read, and it kept a good pace. I took it as one person’s interpretation of society, not a factual account.”

“The Jon Boub sequence is really good,” Jim Redd says. “It really helped me to visualize what happened.”

But Jeff Benjamin gives the book poor marks. “Most of the writing is just bad quality,” he says. “There’s no real linear progression, and the action is spaced out with long periods of commentary. Overstatement is rampant. Everything is to the highest degree. It makes you wonder whether the author can distinguish degrees of subtlety.

“It has a couple good sections,” he concedes. “The firsthand accounts of messengering are the strength of the book. But the book is out of control in terms of scope. He’s trying to tie together way too many elements. It treats its subjects superficially because it has to. No book can cover so much in 300 pages with any depth.”

“I’m proud of what I’ve written, because I think it speaks to the hearty, hardworking American reader,” says Culley. “The book articulates my political view of cycling and my views of the sustainable city. It’s a proposal written by a layman for architects, engineers, and developers to consider. I want to get people talking about transportation and how it affects a city.”

There’s also a range of opinions about whether the book will have a positive effect for urban cyclists.

Knol hopes it will improve the public's perception of bike messengers. "Anything to get their message out would be good. Bike messengers are special people. I only wish more people would consider them as humans. Secretaries hate 'em, people in elevators look through them, yet they carry million-dollar checks to and from banks. They're out there in blinding snowstorms and on icy streets to make sure businesses prosper."

"I think it's awesome that the book is coming out," says 20-year veteran Scott "Super Dave" Shanahan. "We've had two documentaries about messengers in Chicago, but this will be the first book." He adds that it may help improve the image of Chicago messengers, which was tarnished recently when a courier pushed a man down the stairs at Union Station. "The crap hit the fan when that messenger killed a commuter–that just put the messengers in a bad slump. So some positive publicity will be a good thing."

Jack Blackfelt agrees. "Rebecca trashes Chicago in her book. It's good that a more positive book is being written about the city." He's also glad that Culley is publicizing the McBride case. "If he tells the story accurately, the facts of the case will shock any nonmessenger reader."

"I absolutely think it's a good thing he's publicizing the McBride case in his book," says T.C. O'Rourke, a bike activist who's been closely following the case. "Although it may make cycling seem dangerous, it's getting out the truth."

But Michael Burton, a former messenger who helped organize the early Critical Mass rides here, feels Culley misrepresented the nature of the movement. He cited one line in particular: "The Chicago Critical Mass was furious with the outcome of Boub v. Wayne Township."

"It leads you to believe Critical Mass is an organized entity, and it's not," says Burton. "All it is is a monthly ride. I bet more than half the people on a ride wouldn't have any idea who Boub is.

"I think that riders in Critical Mass have been very good about not falling into the trap of being spokespersons for the ride. That has helped hold the ride's integrity as a leaderless, anarchistic gathering. While I'm excited about the book, I hope that it doesn't lead to the establishment of spokespersons, people claiming to be leaders for the Mass and an implied hierarchy within the ride."

Randy Neufeld, executive director of the Chicagoland Bicycle Federation, hopes the book will raise the public's awareness of bike issues. "It's another thing that puts biking on people's radar screen," he says. "A lot of us in bike advocacy don't realize how invisible these issues are to the majority of people."

"Unless it causes divisiveness, I think it's going to be good for the scene," says Gareth Newfield, a computer programmer who rides in Critical Mass. "The more people think about biking the better."

Culley received his first copy of the finished book by overnight delivery a few Saturdays ago. "Isn't it beautiful?" he asked, pulling it out of a plastic bag after riding in the rain. The compact hardback is indeed a

handsome volume. The jacket is a striking combination of duct-tape silver, black, and yellow, with the text edgily arranged at odd angles. Arms crossed, clutching his two-way radio and messenger bag, framed by the image of a bicycle wheel, Culley smiles proudly in the cover photo. There are plenty of black-and-white pictures inside, from blurry action shots of messengering and Critical Mass rides to introspective studio portraits of bikers like James Daniels, Marcus Moore, and Kim Morris. Culley thinks it's a steal at $19.95.

Other members of the local cycling community will have a chance to experience The Immortal Class firsthand when Culley holds his first reading at 7 PM this Friday, March 30, at Barbara's Bookstore in Old Town. There's a Critical Mass ride that night at 5:30, and, though the route is never completely predetermined, Culley plans to pass out a map that will lead riders to his reading.

He's cut down to biking three days a week for Service First. "Right now I'm hibernating," he says, conserving his energy for his eight-city book tour. He may bicycle between some of his appearances on the west coast. In the meantime he's in regular communication with Villard's publicity department. "There's more good news coming in every day," he says. "Things are moving quickly now."

But then Culley's bright future was almost cut short by his run-in with that trucker.

A little after 4 PM on a Friday, he was cruising north on Halsted for a pickup, pumping the pedals on his work bike, a skinny-tired hybrid with upright handlebars. As he came to a red light at Randolph, he couldn't clear the intersection because two vehicles were approaching in the left lane of westbound traffic. The first was a small car. "I stopped and gave it room to make a left turn," says Culley. "However, it was making an illegal U-turn. When I saw it was trying to make the U-turn, I took a few steps with my bike to the left and gave it room."

Behind the first car was a National Waste Management truck, the kind of rig that carries Dumpsters to construction sites. This one was empty. "The truck driver was clearly being very aggressive," says Culley. "He was trying to push the car in front forward and trying to make his left turn. He blared his horn and shouted something as I made room for the car making its U-turn. I communicated with both hands to say, 'Dude's making an illegal turn.'"

The truck driver responded by making his left faster than normal. The truck would have swiped Culley if he hadn't dismounted. It did hit his front wheel, yet the driver was still yelling. "I dropped my bicycle and I yelled back, 'Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you,'" says Culley. The truck continued south on Halsted toward Greek Town.

"Then I had this moment of standing in an intersection on a gorgeous day," says Culley. "I pick up my bike and get on it again. I wonder if I should continue north and make my delivery. I see that the truck is unable to get through Halsted quickly, so the thought lingers, should I tell him something?" Unsure of what to do, he began to ride slowly southbound. "I was asking myself the question, 'What's the right thing to do here?'"

The truck stopped at a red light at Madison. “I was still rolling in his direction,” Culley says, “so I said, may as well tell him what I think. I was not angry. I had only one package on; I was not in a hurry. I came up on his passenger side, knowing that he was watching me approach, feeling that if I came up on his driver’s side I would have been too antagonistic.”

With the light red, Culley pulled in front of the truck, got off his bike, and confronted the driver. “I don’t take getting hit lightly,” he said. “You did the wrong thing.”

The driver yelled back, “Fuck you. Get out of my fucking way.”

“He lets his foot off the brake and starts to push me with the front of the vehicle,” says Culley. “And I don’t move. I just make it real clear, ‘I just want you to know you did the wrong thing there.'”

The driver stepped out of his cab, walked up to Culley, and gave him a shove on the shoulder.

“With my hand between us in a gesture of peace I say, ‘All I want from you right now is an apology,'” says Culley.

The driver stepped closer, holding his clenched fists at his sides. Yelling, he came so close that their noses touched. Culley gave him a head butt. “This guy was fucking attacking me. I gave him the option to apologize,” he exclaims.

Thrown, the trucker took a step back, then lunged forward swinging. The messenger dropped his bike, and a fistfight began in the middle of the street. The driver grabbed Culley’s jacket and bike bag and pulled them over his head. Freeing himself from his jacket and bag, Culley blocked the trucker with his left hand while punching him with his right. Drivers at the intersection and people at a bus stand stopped and gaped but did not try to break up the fight.

The trucker seized Culley’s left arm and pulled him into a headlock. “He’s pulling my head backward,” he says, reenacting the scene. “It was very forceful and I was worried he could break my neck. My only escape, it seems, is to trip him by putting my right foot underneath his left knee and leaning back. We both go down.”

That’s when the strangling started. “A long time passes and I feel I have no defense. I wondered if some of the witnesses will come to my aid. They don’t. I’m not panicked, but I realize I’ve only got one chance to get out. I bring my hands underneath his arms and look directly at his nose. And while I’m starting to see spots, I’m starting to go blurry, I pull off one last punch.”

The trucker didn’t let go, but Culley could tell he was weakened. With his extended right hand Culley began to push the trucker’s head to the right while prying his hands off his neck with his left.

"He suddenly gets up and lets me go," says Culley. "I roll to my left side and crawl up to my knees. I think I see him hunched over with a ball of mucus falling from his face. It was just a flash–my head was not real clear."

The light turned yellow as the driver ran back to the cab of his truck and closed the door. Culley got up and pulled his bike out of the way. The truck drove off.

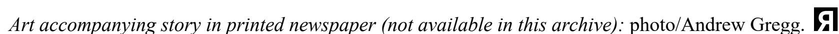
Despite the close call, Culley says he doesn't regret confronting the trucker. "I'm glad I stood up for my right to the road, for what I believed in. I think it's wrong that I should be so threatened and intimidated on a regular basis by aggressive drivers. Just because I don't back down doesn't mean I was looking for trouble. I do have a right to my space and I'll keep it. Sharing the road is a very serious thing."

A week after the strangling incident, I run into Culley on a rainy afternoon in the lobby of the AT&T Building on Monroe. We're both making deliveries. With my navy blue helmet, raincoat, and Cannonball Courier bag, I feel rather drab beside him. He's wearing a blue helmet, black cycling skullcap, and bulbous eye shields. A beat-up red Service First T-shirt covers a flashy racing jacket from the Washington, D.C., messenger association. He wears tan cargo shorts over black winter tights and racing shoes shielded by neoprene spats. He carries a huge messenger bag custom-made to resemble the Chicago flag. His belt buckle looks like a coin slot and reads "5 cents. Insert coin. Unzip. Shake well. Guaranteed action. Internal use only."

Riding the elevator to the transfer floor, Culley is literally bouncing off the walls with excitement as we discuss his book. We disembark, and I walk toward a bank of elevators for the upper floors. He jogs in place beside me. We take the elevator up. He gets off on the 33rd floor while I continue on to the 38th. On the way down, I assume he's already on his way out of the building, but the car stops on 33. Just as the elevator doors are about to close, Culley runs up and jams his foot inside with a grin.

Back on the transfer floor, we walk to the first bank of lifts. Just as we get there, the elevator doors close in the face of a black man in a topcoat. The guy is carrying a briefcase with a fraternity-letter luggage tag.

Culley chides the young professional: "Man, you gotta have initiative to make it in this world."


Art accompanying story in printed newspaper (not available in this archive): photo/Andrew Gregg.