

[The Hoover Hog](#)

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Coffee or Something Stronger: An Interview with Uncle Fester



Writers like to imagine that their work will have some lasting influence, but rare are those scribes who can demonstrate the worldly impact of their words by clear reference to court documents and federal committee reports. Whatever may be said of Rick Moody's clotted prose, copies of *Purple America* seldom turn up in criminal inventories. And while chin-clutching café habitués strain to wrest meaning from the first few pages of their freshly downloaded Kindle editions of *The Pale King*, odds are vanishingly small that David Foster Wallace's posthumous *Bildungsroman* will ever be linked to the mass-murderous deeds of an [apocalyptic terrorist cult](#).

For two decades and some change, the underground writer known as [Uncle Fester](#) has been

writing *genuinely* influential books. While his name may not come up in graduate dissertations and intellectual salons, the import of Fester's oeuvre can be described in the hand-written labels of sealed evidence bags and in the photo-documented environs of police-cordoned clandestine drug labs all over the globe. Although they present information that can be gleaned from standard chemistry texts, books like *Home Workshop Explosives*, *Silent Death*, and of course, *Secrets of Methamphetamine Manufacture* are perennial candidates for state censorship. Indeed, the mere existence of such literature can be enough to disturb the sensibilities of otherwise stalwart defenders of the First Amendment.

It may not help that Fester is a competent – and damn entertaining – writer who knows his shit and does his homework. A onetime National Merit Finalist who repeatedly aced his SATs, Fester double majored in chemistry and biology at Marquette University, graduating with a BS degree and a bright future. It was around this time that a taste for tweak landed Fester – then known as Steve Preisler – behind bars, a fateful turn out of which, like [Sade and Genet](#), he would find his true calling, and have his revenge.

It has been rumored – and I'm spreading the rumor now – that Uncle Fester was the real life inspiration for Walter White of *Breaking Bad*. If that's true, his influence is even greater than I imagined. Eat your heart out, Jonathan Franzen.

In the following interview, Uncle Fester shares his thoughts on meth use and abuse, headshop highs, the future of underground publishing, and his stint as a script consultant for a certain popular TV show.

Enjoy.

Coffee or Something Stronger: An Interview with Uncle Fester

THE HOOVER HOG: When I mentioned to friends that I was planning to interview the infamous "Uncle Fester," everyone said, "Oh, you have to ask him about *Breaking Bad*!" So I guess that's where we'll start. I'm a fan of the show, but I have a feeling the chemistry can be a bit fanciful. Your thoughts?

UNCLE FESTER: Yes, the equipment they have on the show is actually beer brewing equipment, along with a culture incubator they picked up. They didn't want to have to get real gear made as they have a budget. I helped out with the scripts last year and the dialog at least got better. They have made it clear that Mr. White is cooking through the phenylacetone routes (that was implied earlier in season three) and using phenylacetic acid. Little of what they show is real chem, but that's not the point of the show.

I have been told that Mr. White is me, and I wouldn't mind hanging out with him, nor planning some schemes with him. I would have ditched Jesse ages ago, since he is nothing but trouble.

THH: Heh, I figured the producers had to be familiar with your stuff. How did they approach you about script consulting, or whatever?

FESTER: In late 2010, one of the writers, Phoebe Eaton, contacted me by e-mail and asked if I would like to help out on the scripts and we corresponded back and forth a lot over the next few months. We discussed how the production facility should look, what the drums should be labeled as, and various schemes Mr. White might hatch. There was talk about Jesse joining up with the Banditos MC as well. Among the schemes I suggested was for Mr. White to take out a couple of his hostile employers by over pressurizing a hydrogenation vessel and have the resulting shrapnel

riddle their bodies. My idea for doing in his boss was to break a propane gas line and fill the building with a fuel air mixture before tossing in a lighter. They went with Tio doing the suicide bomber role instead. That was funnier anyway.

THH: I'd give the show some credit for its relatively realistic – or at least less than cartoonish – depiction of meth use. I mean, we see the stereotypical addicts and tweakers, but there's also a sense that for a lot of users, it's just not that big of a deal. Yet the very idea of "moderate" or "responsible" meth consumption now seems foreign to most people – even to people who have no problem accepting that other drugs can be used recreationally. Why do you think crank has come to be regarded as such a demonic drug?

FESTER: Part of it is because such screwed up and irresponsible users do exist. Most stereotypes have some foundation in reality; otherwise they would never take root in the first place. Meth is a powerful and long acting substance that is simply not suitable for daily use. A bit on the weekends will cause most people no problems with the rest of their lives. But some people simply will not let it be at that, and so their lives become a real mess. These people are self destructive, and I don't have any idea what can be done about that. It is human nature, I guess.

THH: If I were Bill O'Reilly, I suppose this would be the part of the interview where I would raise my voice and accuse you of being part of the problem, hiding behind the First Amendment to produce these subversive cookbooks that ruin lives! Of course, I'm not Bill O'Reilly, and I don't give a shit what people read or what chemicals they ingest as long as they don't break into my house. But I am curious as to how you respond to people who think that you bear some responsibility for the "screwed up and self-destructive behavior" of others. What do you have to say for yourself, Fester?

FESTER: To say that I am hiding while writing and publishing is a contradictory statement. It makes one very high profile! It was my intent from the start of my writing to train thousands of chefs to replace me as I could no longer practice the art. In that I was more successful than I had ever imagined possible. Whether that is a good or bad thing depends upon one's perspective. I turned out the standard textbooks on the fields I write about. They are also fun to read. People have to take responsibility to keep their lives and affairs in functioning order. Nobody is proclaiming these substances to be health foods. They need to be used with caution.

THH: I imagine some readers will scoff at your suggestion that the books are meant to be "fun to read," but they really are a lot of fun. Your writing is snare-tight and it hums along like good airport fiction. I also love the way the practical – or tactical – information is presented with a such wicked sense of humor (perhaps especially in *Silent Death*). You can take or leave this as a compliment, but it's at least clear that your books are more than rote instruction manuals. So how do you approach the writing, I mean once you have the chemistry down? How important is it that the books be entertaining?

FESTER: There is nothing more painful than reading a dull chemistry book. My approach is to take a subject which should be fun to learn about and make it interesting. I write from the perspective of someone seeking to put the knowledge to use. I include humorous anecdotes when I can, and spell out the dangers from law enforcement and their tactics. My goal is to turn out a book which is informative and fun to read as well.

THH: Can you tell the backstory about how you came to write *Secrets*? You wrote the first edition while you were in jail, right?

FESTER: Back in 1985 I was stuck in my cell at the big house in Wisconsin wondering how I would fill the next several years since I had just been sentenced to five years for cooking and moving crank. As I watched TV in my cell one day, Barbara Walters came on doing a piece about what she called "terrorist publishers." As she whined on about the dreadful underground books out there, they showed scenes of trailers and cars being ripped apart by explosions. She clucked on and on about how horrible it is that nothing can be done to stop the publishing and sale of these books. It was just

so pathetic since she and her partners were producing just a steady stream of drivel.

That was when my plan for spending the next few years in lockup took shape. I would produce underground literature which was technically valid, yet readable by those without advanced schooling in the sciences. I would train an army of chefs in the art of cooking crank and the other areas of science in which I had an interest. The very next day, I had someone down the cell block pass me his typewriter and went to work immediately on the first edition of *Secrets of Methamphetamine Manufacture*.

A lot of guys in prison spend hours banging away on typewriters. They are working on appeals for their cases because they have mountains of time and nothing to fill it with. I blended right in and the staff had no idea just what I was producing on my typewriter, or the effect it would have in the future.

THH: Of course, *Secrets of Methamphetamine Manufacture* – now in its eighth printing – went on to become a cult classic, and it's still the book you're best known for. But you've since written books on LSD manufacture, poisons, improvised explosives, and there's even that one about Brazilian knife fighting. Do you have any personal favorites? Any regrets?

FESTER: My other books are chemistry books which cover areas many people would be interested in. I really like *Home Workshop Explosives*, and the FBI does too as they buy a lot of them to use as training manuals. *Silent Death* is a great read as well and it covers the field of poisons and chemical warfare with an emphasis upon guerrilla applications. That book was used by the [Aum cult](#) in Japan as their tech manual for nerve gas production. That was regrettable, but it is nice to know the recipe works!

THH: There are a few other "underground" writers who put out similar books about drug manufacture and weapons and sundry forms of tactical mischief. Any that you read with interest and appreciation? Any that we should absolutely distrust? When I came to this stuff as a teenager, I got the sense that you and Kurt Saxon were solid, whereas that "Michael Powell" guy – the author *The Anarchist Cookbook* – was mostly full of shit.

FESTER: I too have enjoyed the works of [Kurt Saxon](#). *The Poor Man's James Bond* was the first book of the genre I read. It was funny and informative, and to a large extent I used his writing style as a template for my own. The last I heard a couple years ago, he had suffered a stroke. I hope things are going well for him. I also have to agree that [The Anarchist's Cookbook](#) is fantasy and suitable only for training puppies. In the chemistry field, the author [Strike](#) turned out several good books which were also fun to read. It seems like he has fallen off the face of the earth since he was [busted by the feds](#).

THH: How did you hook up with Loompanics?

FESTER: I found their catalog in the early 80s while I was actively cooking crank. I bought my copy of the *Poor Man's James Bond* from them. I read through their catalog and saw all the fascinating books they carried and I thought to myself: The authors of these books must lead some very interesting and exciting lives. Little did I realize that when I was engaged in pioneering the field of clandestine chemistry, my life was actually more interesting and exciting than theirs! After I got busted and got the idea to produce a book on cooking crank, they were my first choice to get the book published. I was familiar with them and liked their line of books.

THH: It strikes me that the underground press was very different when you were first being published. I mean, unless you lived near a well-stocked anarchist bookstore, it took some effort just to find sources for this type of literature, usually in some weird mail order catalog that was advertised in the *Whole Earth Catalog* or in the back pages of *Soldier of Fortune*. Then you placed your order and waited patiently for the parcel to arrive. Nowadays so much of the information is on the Web, which I suppose is a good thing on measure, but the thrill of the hunt is gone. I'm prone to nostalgia, but what do you think of this brave new world? Do you see any future for pulp-based underground publishing?

Yes, there is a lot of information on the net and people have come to expect the instant gratification to be had at the click of a mouse, but there is just no filter on the content. There is so much erroneous material available, and if you don't already know the field quite well sorting out the good from the bad is impossible. In addition, a lot of material which was originally good has become dated and is useless. This is particularly true in the field of clandestine drug manufacture because the available materials change so rapidly over time.

The worst thing of all about the net is the prevalence of copyright piracy. People have come to expect the right to steal! That is one way to get valid information on controversial topics off the net. Just download a stolen copy of a genuine book on the subject you are interested in. The people who run these download sites are repulsive in every way. Take the example of Mr. [Dotcom who ran Megaupload](#). Fat-assed, pimple-faced and cowardly are just some of his better traits. I would simply love to be locked inside a cage with him for a few weeks. We would have one-on-one counseling sessions as I would teach him about the evils of stealing other people's work.

There are plenty of other Mr. Dotcoms out there. More of them need to be put into lockup like him so that there is at least some real risk to their crimes. Until the matter of copyright piracy is addressed there is no future to the underground press, or publishing as a whole. A person with stolen goods can always undercut a legitimate publisher. Every movie I see on dvd starts with the FBI warning saying the feds investigate copyright theft. If that is so, their investigative techniques leave plenty to be desired.

THH: Getting back to the real world, I find it odd that there should be so much focus on crystal when prescription speed is everywhere. I don't know if you have experience with Adderall, but I've tried it a few times and have enough frame of reference to say it's a pretty serious drug, and it's sort of mind-boggling that so many kids are on the stuff 24/7. Last I checked, Dexedrine was still being prescribed to soldiers for fatigue management. College students pop pills to study. Many of our mothers and grandmothers were gobbling up diet pills when they hosted Tupperware parties and Book of the Month Club meetings. And so on. Does all of this suggest that people have a *need* for speed? That maybe that's part of human nature, too?

FESTER: Oh yes, kids and Adderall. My daughter has a learning disability and roughly ten years ago when she was in third grade the school brought in experts to try to diagnose her learning problems. Their guess was the usual standby—ADHD—and off she went to Ritalin and Adderall land. The pills did not improve her learning performance, so they kept increasing her dose to the point that she couldn't sleep at night and she shed a lot of weight. She also liked the pills a LOT. Finally after several months the school pulled the plug on this experiment because the high dosage of amphetamine on a daily basis was turning her into a cranky bitch at school. This turned out to be the beginning of my daughter's affection for pills of all types.

Yes, it is human nature to like stimulants. Most of us indulge to some extent or another, be it the morning cups of coffee or something stronger.

THH: At least for the moment, it seems the media focus has largely shifted to quasi-legal designer drugs, and we know from the screaming headlines that bath salts will turn ordinary law-abiding people into ravenous [face-chomping zombies](#). What do you make of the new generation of headshop highs? Do you think their rise in popularity is in any way related to recent legal measures aimed at indirectly controlling meth production? And how do you see such trends playing out – I mean when chemists are constantly trying to stay ahead of law enforcement by developing compounds that lawmakers never imagined? Sometimes I think it's only a matter of time before someone tries to circumvent the procedural busywork by introducing legislation to criminalize specific states of mind.

FESTER: I would have guessed that both K2 and bath salts would have been banned from the start under the [Analog Substances Act](#). I was wrong and so really missed the boat on those two! The synthetic cannabinoids in K2 are obviously so closely related to THC that they would seem on the

face of the matter to be banned under the law, but by saying the material is room incense rather than intended for consumption they were able to avoid the wording of that law.

Bath salts are a member of the amphetamine family, but structurally dissimilar enough from controlled amphetamines that they would not on their face be covered under that law. By further saying that the material is bath salts, it can also be said it is not intended for consumption and so not covered under that law.

Both materials were written about in the scientific lit well before they were marketed. The synthetic cannabinoids were written about in the late 1990's, and bath salts MDPV dates to a 1969 article. I'm sure there are other substances out there yet to be put on sale.

People buy and use K2 and bath salts for a variety of reasons. First of all, the cost is going to be cheaper than buying good weed or some meth or coke. Secondly, it was not illegal, so there were no worries about being caught in possession of these legal materials. Finally, for those who have to produce urine specimens for their keepers, the tests used do not detect the presence of these drugs. It is entirely driven by law enforcement. People run to the refuge of these legal and undetectable highs. I have been told that the buzz from K2 is more chemical than the herbal high of weed. Erratic behavior is more likely with it was well. People would be better off sticking to the real weed, but the legal consequences pushed them to the alternative.

THH: I almost never smoke pot anymore because it tends to make me nervous, but I did take K2 for a spin last year and I found it to be remarkably similar to the real thing. I think I get what you mean about the buzz being more chemical than herbal, but that could be the power of suggestion. It definitely *tasted* more chemical. – But back to the Analog Substances Act. To clarify, under the Act, a chemical can be treated as a controlled substance if it is intended for human consumption and is “substantially similar” to another controlled substance identified by statute. Those are the broad strokes, right?

FESTER: The materials sold as K2 were actually a whole series of THC analogs. These analogs were written about in scientific papers dating to the 1990's. Each of them have somewhat different effects as to the quality and length of the buzz they produce. As one of the analogs was individually banned by the DEA, the producers would switch to another analog in the series. That was how they would get around both the Analog Substances Act and the more traditional approach of outlawing one substance at a time. They demonstrated that the approach works, so you can bet this will be an ongoing phenomenon. I'm sure there are many more orphaned drugs out there which are similar in effect to popular drugs such as weed, speed or even opiates. By labeling them as something else such as leather conditioner or furniture polish for example, they could be sold legally.

THH: How is it determined that a novel compound is similar enough to fall under the law? Is this strictly a question of chemistry, or are psychoactive effects taken into account? It seems to me the potential for arbitrary enforcement is a real problem, but then I also imagine the pharmaceutical industry would take notice if prosecutors were to color too far outside the lines.

FESTER: Under the Analog Substances Act, the determination that a new drug compound is an analog of an already banned substance is based upon its molecular structure. Exactly how similar an analog has to be to be covered under this law is not specified, and so just what is legal and what is illegal is not at all clear. The Federal District Court in Denver has ruled that the law is too vague to be enforced. This ruling, however, only covers that District so it can still be prosecuted in other Districts. There has always been the legal tradition dating back to common law that it should be clear to all just what is legal and what is not. The definition of what exactly is an "analog" is not clear even to a chemist. Prosecutors, judges and juries are not at all equipped to even begin to decide cases involving the subtleties of organic chemistry. [Dr. Shulgin](#) pointed out that everyone could be prosecuted under this law because their own bodies produce substances which could be considered to be analog substances to banned drugs.

I'm sure this law is going to be the focus of future drug enforcement since the people who produced the bath salts and the K2 synthetic THC have demonstrated that there are holes in this law that one can drive a truck through. The response I expect from the enforcement end will be to try to expand the present definition of what is an analog. That will lead to such unclarity as to what is and is not illegal that the entire law will likely be thrown out by the courts.

THH: Advances in computer modeling are said to have revolutionized pharmaceutical research and development in recent years. Do you see this changing the game for the design of licit recreational substances, perhaps by making it easier to tweak the chemistry enough to avoid prosecution?

FESTER: The great majority of people do not have access to these computer programs, so I would imagine that the present tactics will continue to be followed. For instance, the series of THC analogs listed in the scientific literature from articles in the 1990's are by no means exhaustive. The substances were the ones used in K2, and so by extending this list in a fairly obvious manner more and more analogs could continue to be produced. They would each have to be tested by the chef or marketing guru to determine the kind of buzz they give, but by calling the end product a room incense or something along that line, the law will be skirted.

Similarly, there are a great number of amphetamine analogs which have never made their way into pharmaceutical usage. They too could be produced and labelled as not for human consumption. There are also quite a variety of opiates which could find their way onto open sale by following the same tactic. The synthetic heroin 3-methyl fentanyl, which was banned some time ago, is by no means the end of opiate analogs which could be made and then legally sold.

THH: Another crank-centric question: What's your take on the recent wave of litigation centering on meth contamination – the cases where residues in walls and fibers are claimed to pose a grave health hazard, requiring radical remediation and compensatory awards. I spent a few hours trying to trace the sources on some of the more dire pronouncements bandied about in legal briefs and law articles and I came away with the impression that the science is dubious at best. Am I wrong to be skeptical?

FESTER: In the great majority of the cases, this is theater for the boobs watching on TV to absorb and come away with the lesson that somebody cooking a little crank down the street poses a mortal danger to them. Keep in mind that the typical raid shown on TV will be somebody who just cooks a bit from time to time and lives in the house full time with no after effect from it. An exception to this general rule would be somebody who has had an accident and set the place on fire and as a result there are chemicals and their fumes just permeating the raid site. Another exception would be a large industrial cooking operation where the quantity of chemicals in place may justify taking a series of precautions. These cases are not at all typical of most raids. It is simply theater.

As to the remediation issue, if the wastes from the processes are improperly disposed of then contamination can be a problem. For example if the solvents used don't biodegrade and are dumped into the ground or into a septic system, removing them is going to cost some money. Let's say some small mom and pop crank producer had been dumping his waste toluene solvent into the ground out back of the shop rather than properly disposing of it. Then one has some dead ground similar to what one would see from dumping a similar amount of gasoline into it. Remediation would consist of digging up maybe a cubic yard of dirt and hauling it away.

It is in the area of "home remediation" that the police desire for a theatrical show and the greed of "home remediators" combine to have places where crank had been cooked condemned and gutted. There is no reason for this. The materials used to cook crank, such as iodine, red phosphorus and cold pills all came from the shelves of the local store. They are everyday materials in use in virtually every home. There is no seeping contamination into walls or floors unless somebody spilled a batch. That contamination would be localized to the spill area. The home remediation racket is all theater and greed unless the place had been cooking quite large amounts of meth.

THH: You should consider moonlighting as an expert witness.

Anyway, thanks so much for your time. Any future projects you'd like to mention in closing?

FESTER: Thanks much! My next project will be the ninth edition of *Secrets of Methamphetamine Manufacture*. Before I have it printed, I will consult with the printer as to whether there is any type of paper or print font which makes scanning the pages and putting the book up for pirate download more difficult.

Secrets of Amphetamine Manufacture (8th Edition) is available from [Nine-Banded Books](#). All of Uncle Festers books can be ordered directly from [Festering Publications](#).

[*Memento mori.*](#)