

BOOKS

NOTHING REALLY MATTERS

Author Tom Lutz talks to Sabine Kleinlein about 400 years of slacker culture

Lutz is sort of a slacker specialist. Inspired by his couch-surfing son Cody, he investigated the leisurely life in *Doing Nothing - A History of Loafers, Loungers, Slackers, and Bums in America* (published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, June 2006). *Doing Nothing* examines the conflicts people who refuse to work face and the impact they have on others. To Lutz the slacker is "a critique of our culture's twisty relation to work and to leisure." The slacker serves as a lens through which he inspects the work ethics and work environment of his particular time.

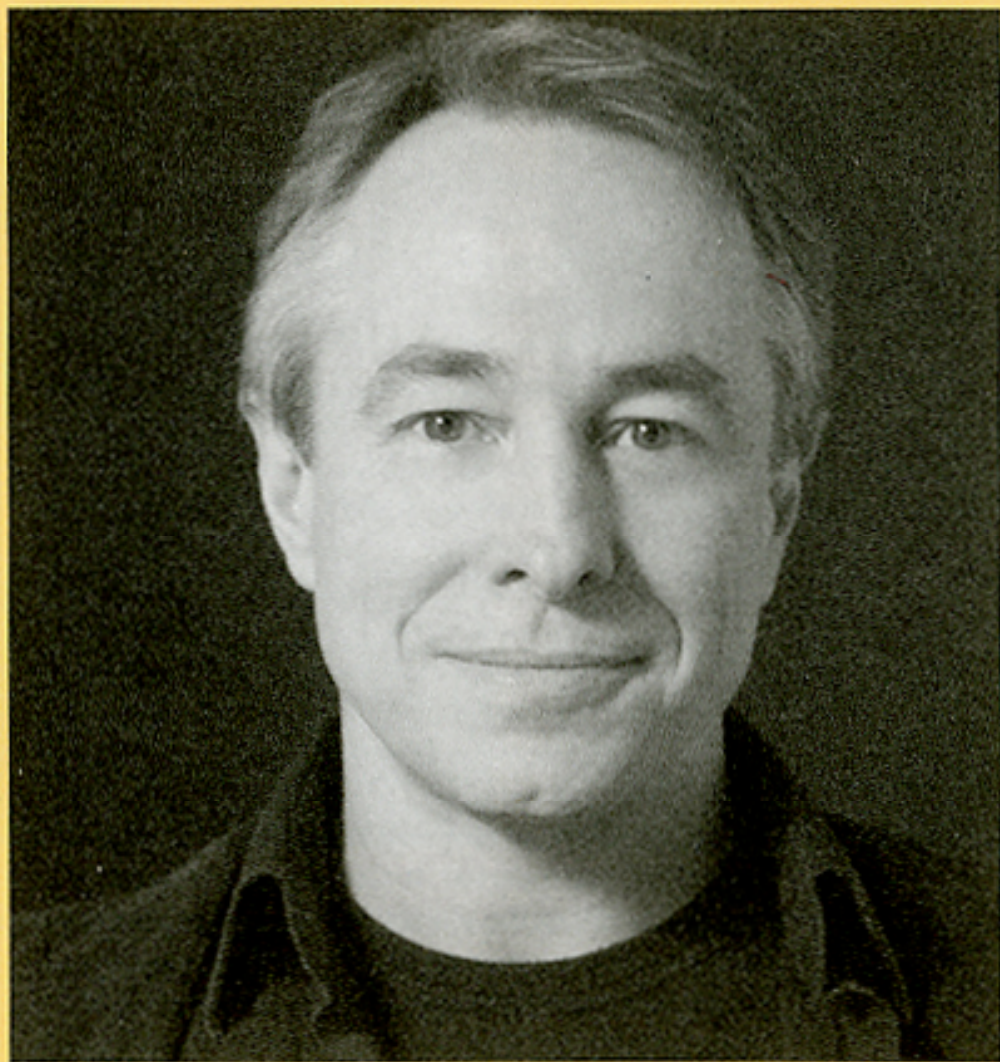
Among the scores of workless -Lutz's bibliography spans well over 500 entries—are figures from literature, film, television and reality. Tearing through Lutz's book I encountered Bartleby, The Scrivener, whose famous sentence "I would prefer not to" drove his boss from his Wall Street office. I ran into Goethe's Werther, Goncharov's Oblomov, Bertrand Russell, Paul

Lafargue and Jack Kerouac (a writer too lazy to edit his own prose). I also learned that these "lazy" guys weren't called slackers back then: The term "slacker" was originally used to label those who dodged World War I. (Various propaganda movies from the time carry the term "Slacker" in their titles.)

This notion leads Lutz to the draft-dodging, vacation-loving US President. "George W. Bush," Lutz writes, "will likely go down in history as our slacker president." No slacker can flee Lutz's reach. The author travels as far as to Japan to meet the free-tah, the contemporary Japanese slacker. The last four hundred centuries of loafing and sauntering make for a riveting reading experience.

IDLER: Mr. Lutz, in your book you explore the last three or four centuries of American and European slacker culture. Can you give a couple of examples as to how the slacker has changed according to his or her time in history?

LUTZ: Whenever the world of work changes, the slacker figure appear on the cultural horizon. At each point, the slacker figure takes on some of the other cultural issues that are involved in the changing work place. So when Joseph Dennie, an early American slacker, writes up his slacker figures in the late 18th and early 19th centuries he pretends to have aristocratic sentiments, attitudes and predilections, but, in fact, he was a middle class person himself. The change seemed to



ANNE FISHEIN

be a change from a world in which the aristocracy ran things to a world in which the manufacturing elite ran things. So the slacker figure then had an aristocratic quality, a quality which was passing. When Jack Kerouac came on the scene in the middle of the 20th century, he affected a working class image because older working class values seemed to have been lost: the world of work changed into one in which people were shuffling papers in office buildings rather than actually making things. So the Beats wore blue jeans, work boots and t-shirts, the clothes of the working class. But there is no even line of development. At each point it's a very specific flavour related to the other

**"IN MY OWN LIFE
THERE HAVE
BEEN MOMENTS
IN WHICH I HAVE
DECIDED THAT I
DID NOT HAVE TO
HAVE A CAREER"**

issues.

IDLER: How would you define the contemporary slacker?

LUTZ: When people think about the contemporary slacker, they often think of the activities the slacker takes part in. That means sitting on the couch watching TV, playing videogames or spending all their time on the computer. So more than a dress style or a relation to a certain class, contemporary slackers are defined by their relation to the media. The Beats, the American expatriates in the 1920s or the Jazz Age slackers were defined by drinking, drugs or poetry, not in relation to the mass media and media games, which is what the contemporary slacker is all about.

IDLER: To me it seems, to a certain extent, the slacker is defined by the perception of others...

LUTZ: Yes, to some extent the slacker is always in the eye of the beholder. In my own life there have been moments in which I decided that I did not have to have a career. It was an ethical decision against ruining the planet. But there are also times when I cannot seem to do anything except play a game on my computer, and I berate myself for being a slacker. There's no ethical force to it at all, it's simply my own procrastination. And then there are times when people think, "Wow, you don't really ever work. You have to go to your teaching job once or twice a week and that's not a real job. You are really a slacker." Of course, I don't feel like that about myself. Most of the time, I feel like I work fairly hard.

IDLER: Do you think slackers ever suffer from their slacking?

LUTZ: It might be impossible to be countercultural without suffering. If you are not a sociopath, you feel social pressure to conform. If you decide not to conform, there is going to be a certain amount of suffering. The adoption of a counter- or sub-cultural identity may be a way to alleviate suffering. Or it may increase your suffering. It can change by



the moment, depending on who you are with or who you are imagining you are with.

IDLER: I noticed that the media's attention has recently shifted to the slacker. Steve McKeivitt's book "City Slackers" just came out, and there have been a number American guide books that advice people on how to appear busy at work while actually slacking. Is there a trend?

LUTZ: Yes, I think there is a little bubble of slacker figures right now. It has to do with the outsourcing of various jobs. So there is an anxiety about the future of work and that's always one of the prime ingredients for the flourishing of such cultural representations.

IDLER: Many of the slackers in your book are also writers. Do you think there is a correlation between slacking and writing?

LUTZ: We know about the slacker because of writers. So to a certain extent, the writer has created the slackers. And then, there is something about

PIONEERS OF SLACKING.
LEFT: WALT WHITMAN
RIGHT: JOSEPH DENNIE

**"I REALLY STILL
EMBRACE FIGHTING
WHAT'S WRONG IN
THE CULTURE"**

the nature of that activity: writing is often difficult for the outside to understand. If you see somebody nailing two boards together you see them working. If you see somebody farming a field, you see them working. And when you see somebody writing you just see them sitting in a chair. It just doesn't look like work. It doesn't even look like work to the person who is doing it. Writing includes an enormous amount of time reading, sauntering, sitting, thinking and doing all sorts of things that people don't associate with work.

IDLER: So doing nothing is part of the creative process?

LUTZ: Yes, and looking like you are doing nothing is even a greater part of the creative process. Your work is somebody else's recreation. People doodle when they are not doing anything. They draw, they play music. So writing doesn't look like work to them. That's why sports and Hip Hop figures often seem like slackers, no matter how much actual work is involved.

IDLER: But that means that the line between the slacker and the worker is very hard to draw.

LUTZ: Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi talks about "flow," the psychology of engagement with everyday life. Creativity is having a sense of flow. When we're enjoying our work, it's because we're in this sense of flow. You could argue that when you are in a reverie lying on your back in a field watching the clouds go by, that's a certain kind of flow as well. So slacking, creativity and being one with one's work have a lot of common ground.

IDLER: Can "slacker" even be a category, considering that the term is so malleable and mostly a matter of perspective?

LUTZ: Richard Linklater, who made the film "Slacker," said that he and his friends were using the term in the same way gay people adopted "queer": taking a derogatory comment, owning it and resisting the meanings of that derogatory term in the culture. But since it's meant to be

derogatory, adopting it as a form of self-derision maybe is not particularly helpful for anybody.

It may be that the term slacker itself is on the cusp of being replaced, that we're at the tail end of the usefulness of slacker as a term. The same way "loafer" and "lounger" dropped out of common usage.

IDLER: What qualities in slackers do you personally like?

LUTZ: What am I doing right now? I'm talking to you. Am I working or am I slacking off? There's ways in which I still enjoy those moments. I feel like somehow I'm being a slacker. I really still embrace fighting what's wrong in the culture. Or the feeling that having become a workaholic, I've made a mistake. I feel pleasure when I see people get away with things. I want the thief to get away with it. There's something about the love of the outlaw that's part of it, about that American love of getting something for nothing.

IDLER: And which qualities do you resent?

LUTZ: I was working at an art school last year and a couple of people on my faculty didn't do their jobs. They were slackers! If they had an option to do something or not do it, they would always choose not to do it. Those moments where somebody else's slacking makes more work for you, those are moments where you resent the slacker.

IDLER: How is your son Cody? Still on your couch?

LUTZ: He's fine. He's a writer as well. So he faces some of the same problems that you and I face, which is that sometimes it's hard to work and sometimes there's no way of measuring our output very effectively. He's a smart guy and he knows that being a slacker was a moment in his life and that it is also an ongoing issue. It will be for him as it is for all of us. 