

One murderer, one journalist, two liars

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True Story:

Murder, Memoir, Mea Culpa

By Michael Finkel

HarperCollins, 309 pages, \$36.95

REVIEWED BY DAVID HAYES

In February, 2002, Michael Finkel's world was collapsing around him. A former star New York Times Magazine feature writer, he had just been fired for fabricating details in a story. The night before the Times was to publish an editor's note that, Finkel believed, would end his career, he received a phone call from a reporter with the Oregonian in Portland. Assuming the news had already leaked, Finkel braced himself for questions about his firing. To his astonishment, though, the reporter was calling Finkel to ask about a Portland businessman named Christian Longo, who had just been arrested by the FBI for the murder of his wife and three children. In a bizarre twist, Longo had been hiding out in Mexico and telling people he was Michael Finkel, a writer with The New

York Times.

When the editor's note was published, Finkel became a pariah, joining a rogue's gallery that included Washington Post reporter Janet Cooke, who had written a Pulitzer Prize-winning profile of a fictitious eight-year-old heroin addict, and Stephen Glass, caught fabricating people, quotes and events in dozens of stories in The New Republic and other magazines. Even though the Times and Finkel's other main employer, National Geographic Adventure, fact-checked all of Finkel's previous articles and found only a few insignificant errors, for the foreseeable future he was persona non grata in U.S. journalism.

Finkel and Longo made an unlikely but perfect pair. In the months leading to his trial, Longo decided the only journalist he would communicate with was the man whom he had impersonated (because, he explained, he admired Finkel's writing). Supremely calculating, Longo spun a baroque story of deceit, greed and betrayal which he suspected would resonate with

the disgraced journalist.

Not that Finkel wasn't using Longo: "From the moment the Oregonian reporter had called, I'd had a vague sense that the beginnings of my redemption, both professional and personal, might somehow lie with Longo." Their obsessive relationship involved thousands of handwritten letters, hours of telephone conversations and a handful of meetings in a prison visitor's room.

The result is a strange, and strangely compelling, book — a true-crime thriller with a foot in the niche genre of journalists' mea culpas. But unlike Glass's *The Fabulist*, a clumsily written metafiction, or *Burning Down My Master's House*, a sloppy and self-serving memoir by Jayson Blair, the New York Times reporter guilty of plagiarism and fabrications, Finkel's work is not that of a pathological con man. Although he can be annoyingly self-pitying, he casts himself — credibly, for the most part — as a conscience-stricken journalist using his talents simultaneously to make sense of a murderer and attempt to make amends for his indiscretions.

At first, the book shifts between the discovery of Longo's murdered family and the story behind the article that led to Finkel's downfall. While investigating allegations of child slavery on cocoa plantations in West Africa, Finkel became suspicious. Contrary to most media reports, he concluded that although conditions were deplorable, some well-intentioned but misguided local organizations were fabricating evidence to generate sympathy (and aid) from Western governments, and many children were simply following a script.

Returning to New York, Finkel "wanted to write about the crushing cycle of poverty, and about the suffering that young people were willing to endure in order to eke out a living. At the same time, I wanted to explain how the media can generate misunderstandings, and how aid agencies can perpetuate these errors."

That's a more complex — but less sexy — story, and according to Finkel, his editor at the Times Magazine was unenthusiastic. Finally, he writes, she asked if he could tell the story through a single character. Finkel tried, realized he didn't have enough material on any one child, and panicked. This was his dream job and, at 32, he was the publication's newest high-flying star, a cocky young workaholic whose identity was tied up in his career. Afraid to disappoint his editor, Finkel drew on details from his many interviews, created a com-

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posite character he named Yousouf Malé (the real name of one boy he interviewed), and wrote a beautifully impressionistic article, one that may have, in its way, captured more of the "truth" of West African poverty than many rigorously journalistic accounts.

But still, readers had been deceived and, after the story appeared, one of the aid organizations complained to the Times that the boy whose photograph appeared in the article was not Yousouf Malé, and Malé's background didn't match details in the story. The Times launched an investigation and Finkel was exposed.

The rest of the book focuses mainly on Longo. He was raised a strict Jehovah's Witness, developed a romantic obsession with a fellow worshipper, and married her despite his parents' disapproval. In his mid-20s, with three children and a managerial job, he lived a comfortable life. But when he tried to set up his own business, he experienced a succession of setbacks. One day he forged a \$30,000 cheque to fend off bankruptcy, which led to a spiralling cycle of fraud and duplicity.

Longo's personality — a psychologist labels him a narcissist — rested on an unstable foundation that could not withstand the twin pressures of failure and humiliation. With his family living in debt-ridden poverty, his stature in the community at risk and arrest always a heartbeat away, he took desperate measures.

At first, Finkel's identification with Longo seems a stretch. But then he admits that he'd often lied throughout his life: inventing a dead brother to win the sympathy of a girl he was courting, lying about losing his virginity, about his athletic and musical accomplishments, about his facility with foreign languages. This is what is sometimes thought of as harmless "recreational lying," and inventing details in a magazine article is a

long way from murder, but the parallel becomes clear. Pathological lying — like gambling or overeating — can gain momentum and eventually lead to extreme behaviour.

Finkel, once quoted in an obscure outdoors publication as saying that he rarely talks to fellow writers, so "I have no idea what is good and what is bad, what is right and what is wrong," writes in *True Story*: "The truth is, I saw some of myself in Longo. The flawed parts of my own character — the runaway egotism, the capacity to deceive — were mirrored and magnified in him."

Finkel skillfully lets the story unfold so readers realize, about the same time he did, Longo's crafty strategy. "I was his dress rehearsal. I was his one-man focus group. When it came time to retell his story in court, in a matter of weeks, it would be airtight and polished, edited by his personal writing coach."

It is Finkel's personal relationship with Longo that elevates *True Story* beyond a mere journalistic account of an appalling crime. The dynamic between the depressed writer and the manipulative killer makes for dramatic reading. What about Finkel's ambition, though? Can he, by documenting his own hubris and fall from grace, achieve redemption, a second chance? As Finkel wraps up the Longo story, he inserts a grovelling apology to his editors, the fact-checkers, the photo department, his colleagues, "and to everyone who read the West Africa article."

I understand why Finkel felt compelled to include it, but on the page, it strikes a false note, as though struggling to understand a man who murdered his wife and children was, in the end, a career move.

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