

# MASTERING DECEIT

Jayson Blair, self-avowed plagiarist/fabricator who brought shame on himself and *The New York Times*, keeps a straight face before skeptics as *BIBR* asks the questions. **By Wayne Dawkins**

HYATTSVILLE, MD—As Jayson Blair answered questions from interviewer William E. Cox, president and editor-in-chief of *Black Issues Book Review*, audience members at black-owned Karibu Books stared. A tall brother wearing a black beret stood behind four rows of filled chairs and cocked his head 45 degrees, as if his crooked angle could help him decipher Blair's answers. Two women, neighbors and elders of Blair, also stood in the back of the packed bookstore and stared intently. The March 18 venue was Prince Georges County, Maryland, the Washington, D.C., suburb near where Blair attended the University of Maryland, College Park.

Blair, disgraced journalist, fabricator and author of the new memoir *Burning Down My Masters' House: My Life at The New York Times*, faced a polite yet skeptical audience on his home turf after two weeks of high-profile interviews and other "campaign" stops.

He is a product of the D.C.-area Beltway: Blair grew up in northern Virginia and attended college on the Maryland side. He is the child of middle-class, professional parents, who are social acquaintances of Cox and his wife. Cox, however, had never actually met Jayson Blair prior to their public conversation at Karibu, and Cox says this was deliberate on his part "to keep this encounter professional, objective and unbiased."

Two dozen seats in the bookstore were quickly filled and during the 90-minute session, a standing-room crowd flowed into the bookstore shelves, and more people streamed out, into store's mall entrance. The peak crowd was about 50 people. Video cameras recorded the event, and C-SPAN2 broadcast it live.

Cox asked Blair about 20 questions. Most of Blair's answers were probably similar to what readers will find in his memoir. Did Blair say anything new? Probably not. But check out these responses:

"I was living a double life and I wanted to come clean" was Blair's explanation for writing his memoir.

He said, "I broke down into tears" while an intern at *The Boston Globe*, when editors told him to slow down because his hustle intimidated other interns. "The concept of not working hard was foreign to me," said Blair. At *The New York Times*, he said one year he wrote 200 stories, while most other reporters averaged 50 to 60 a year.

Somewhere during his four-year stint at the newspaper Blair said, "I put my career and desires to be perceived a certain way ahead of my integrity." He told the audience that he was officially diagnosed as suffering from bipolar disorder. Then he said his therapist told him his being manic depressive "would not explain my behavior." The diagnosis, Blair told the audience, "is not meant as an excuse." "Lying is a character flaw, and one I am trying to correct," he added.



Jayson Blair at Karibu Books in Maryland in March.

Blair's explanation for falsely claiming datelines for places he wrote about, when in fact he filed fictitious stories from a computer in his Brooklyn apartment: "I locked myself in my own private hell out of my desperation to show everything was under control."

Of the handful of audience members who asked questions, a man about Blair's age asked the author if his transgressions will have a chilling effect on blacks working in daily journalism. Blair replied that the toughest question he's had to answer while on tour was when a

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*Village Voice* writer asked him what his advice was for the next black intern at *The New York Times*. He said that advice would probably be "know yourself" and "be willing to ask for help."

Blair spoke the night before *USA Today* confirmed and other media reported another high-profile journalism scandal: foreign correspondent Jack Kelley, who is white, of *USA Today* allegedly fabricated substantial portions of eight major stories while on assignment. The correspondent resigned in January.

Ironically, Kelley's misdeeds is the one thing that makes Blair's seem prophetic. He concluded managers need to more closely monitor reporters' stories, expense reports and cell-phone records, even though much of journalism is built on trust between writers and editors. *Wayne Dawkins, contributing editor with BlackJournalist.com, is author of Rugged Waters: Black Journalists Swim the Mainstream (2003, August Press) and Black Journalists: The NABJ Story (August Press).*

## **Burning Down My Masters' House: My Life at The New York Times**

by Jayson Blair

New Millennium Press, March 2004

\$24.95, ISBN 1-932-40726-X

**J**ayson Blair asks a lot of his readers. In his memoir, he repeatedly tells how he lied to his editors, to colleagues at the paper, sources, even to his girlfriend in order to write dozens of newspaper articles that later were discredited because of plagiarized details—recreations that were suitable for fiction but unacceptable for journalism.

Blair asks us to believe that since he destroyed his journalism career, he can level with us in a book.

Consider every detail with skeptical eyes. He has lied in elaborate ways that most people will not comprehend, so how can we know that he has not conned us now?

Blair writes convincingly as a young, black man who has the privilege to observe and participate in the office politics of what is often considered the best newspaper in America, if not the world. A recurring theme throughout *Burning Down My Masters' House* is that Blair knows how to curry favor with editors, so he gets plum assignments and his stories get good display in the paper.

Blair also uses deception to get what he wants. His favorite tactic, he writes, was to log into *The Times'* computerized photo service from his computer in his Brooklyn apartment to obtain images that allowed him to recreate scenes. He did this instead of being an eyewitness to events at the scene—footwork for which most journalists live.

I can recognize the newsroom, its people and dynamics in *Burning Down My Masters' House*. The facade of the building is familiar, but the foundation is rotten.

—Reviewed by Wayne Dawkins