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BOOK

WORLD

The Paper Chase

The New York Times sets the tone, not only for what we read each day, but what we see on the network news. Newspapers and television stations across the nation follow its lead. This state of affairs, in a nation that sees itself as the capital of free markets, is appalling, but it is the reality of the news business. So when disgraced New York Times reporter Jayson Blair—who left the paper last year in a torrent of plagiarism and fabrication charges and brought down the Times’s senior management in his wake—writes a book called *Burning Down My Masters’ House*, we should pay attention. We shouldn’t dismiss his allegations just because the people currently running the New York Times tell us to (as they recently did in a news article on their own pages).

In a well-publicized series of news reports—broken first by The Washington Post’s media reporter, Howard Kurtz—the 27-year-old Blair, then a national reporter for the paper of record, was discovered to have plagiarized details about the story of a Texas family that was coping with the news that a family member was missing in action in Iraq. Blair took many of the quotes and details of his piece from a story by Macarena Hernandez, a reporter at the San Antonio Express-News. In his piece, Blair purported to have interviewed members of the family in person. In reality, he never even left his apartment in Brooklyn. Upon discover-

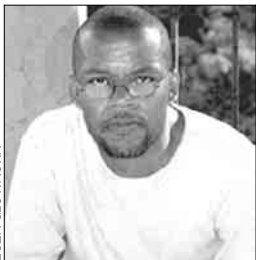
BURNING DOWN MY MASTERS’ HOUSE

My Life at The New York Times

By Jayson Blair. New Millennium. 298 pp. \$24.95

Reviewed by HUGH PEARSON

A tell-all (or at least a tell-some) from the infamous disgraced New York Times reporter.



ZUZA GLOWACKA

Jayson Blair

reported by an uncredited stringer (i.e., a freelance writer). In an effort to regain the public’s trust, the Times reviewed many of its reporting standards and practices and, for the

ing that it had, indeed, published a hoax, the Times uncovered 35 more stories Blair wrote containing plagiarism and/or fabrications.

Soon Blair was gone—as were Times executive editor Howell Raines, managing editor Gerald Boyd and star reporter Rick Bragg, after increased scrutiny revealed that Bragg put his byline on a story largely

first time in its history, appointed an ombudsman. And the Times wasn’t the only paper to undergo such soul-searching. In a renewed effort to serve the public more responsibly, news organizations across the country reviewed policies on unattributed and anonymous sources, as well as soft spots in editorial oversight of the kind that permitted Blair’s abuses to go undetected at the Times.

Blair’s memoir is an attempt at quasi-justification for his actions and an indictment of his former employers. He alleges, among other things, that plenty of reporters at the Times committed transgressions similar to his own, in kind if not in degree. He maintains, for example, that “writing off of television was not that odd an occurrence at *The Times*.” He also claims that Times reporters other than Bragg worked under what in-house staff called “toe-touch” datelines: They would, Blair claims, book hurried flights into places where stringers and/or editors had already served up news reports, in order to preserve the technical truth that a bylined reporter had been on the ground where he or she claimed to be reporting from.

Could it be true that this often took place at the Times before the Blair scandal? I don’t think we should simply dismiss what Blair says as dubious whining (if we do, then we are still left with the managerial puzzle of his story: The

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Times clearly, and badly, bungled the character assessment portion of their review when they hired this intern onto their staff). I also know how easy it is to simply get on the telephone and interview someone for a story. As a Wall Street Journal editorial page writer, where I wrote feature editorials that required interviewing, I often traveled but never engaged in “toe-touching.” If I interviewed someone by phone who lived in another city, then my feature editorial was published with no dateline.

Yet I can also imagine how expeditious such a practice would be: Have the reporter working on a story use the telephone, then, to justify an impressive dateline, simply have him or her get on and off an airplane (saving the cost of a hotel, meals and rental car). I can imagine someone watching the budget saying, “Why not?” And when Blair says that the Times (at least before his scandal erupted) often employed uncredited stringers to do much, if not all, of the legwork on a story and then passed it along to in-house reporters who were credited with a sole byline, we do have Rick Bragg’s response to the allegations against him last year as corroboration.

But *Burning Down My Masters' House* is more than a catalogue of alleged line-blurring or worse in the Times’s legendary newsroom. It is also a play-by-play narrative of this young man’s self-destructive chain smoking, alcoholism, drug addiction and undiagnosed manic depression (undiagnosed, that is, prior to the discovery of his deceptions). Reading through Blair’s account of his personal and professional decline, it’s hard to avoid thinking that, even as he was being groomed for great things, some perverse part of him was angling to become a poster child for substance abuse: the equivalent in the journalism world of what Richard Pryor became in the entertainment scene. Indeed, the tales of Blair’s imbibing and snorting are so detailed and lurid that it seems as though one of his publisher’s goals was to put out a story that feeds this nation’s voracious appetite for books about self-destructive African American men, launched by Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice* and (more immediately) *Makes Me Wanna Holler*, the memoir by former Washington Post reporter Nathan McCall.

According to Blair, “cocaine was the woman for me.” In addition, he admits to being the Times staffer who most frequently retired to a local bar called Emmett’s (he could be found there almost every work day, even when he was supposed to be reporting a story; at one point, he even met his drug dealer at Emmett’s). Blair also claims he often took the company car provided by the Times out on personal trips. And he wasn’t beyond taking sexual advantage of

young, nubile public relations staffers who would do anything to get their clients in the New York Times. In one such set piece, Blair is about to finish helping an eager (and drunken) blonde publicist out of her clothes when she stops to deliver the rather priceless punchline: “Jayson, are we going to get a mention in *The Times*?” The deal evidently was closed: Blair claims that, after their evening together, he filed several business stories that included positive mentions of the Internet company she represented.

After reading all this, it was difficult for me to feel any sympathy for Blair. Indeed, I was dismayed that he reeled off legitimate complaints about, for instance, racism in the newsroom, while demonstrating total blindness to the ways in which his behavior could be seen as granting credibility to such racism. Blair raises a point that a good many other media critics have made—that race and class profoundly affect how the Times covers, and places, local crime stories in its pages. Yet he devotes several passages in *Burning Down My Masters' House* to detailing his own cavalier flouting of Times policies, such as breaking “all the minor rules” of the newspaper pertaining to use of the company car and filing timely expense reports. A few pages on, Blair vents his bafflement at metro editor Jon Landsman’s reluctance to take him on as a permanent reporter on his staff. Blair accuses Landsman of racism. Yet, even if one were to grant him this explanation, Blair certainly did nothing to aid the cause of African Americans in the newsroom with his contempt for playing by the rules. To say nothing, of course, of his admitted fondness for whiling away afternoons at Emmett’s.

The excuse that others were engaging in the same practices hardly suffices—any more than it would for a misbehaving junior high school student. And yet Blair clearly relishes offhand, broad-brush characterizations of his former colleagues as companions in his sexual and ethical debauches. It was unremarkable, he writes, when “public relations people substituted theater tickets, free meals and drinks and, sometimes, even sex for mentions. Journalists at *The Times* were considered to have a weak spot for sex. . . .” Blair also depicts his Times colleagues as, literally, his partners in crime. Here for example, is how he describes his role in one Times-ian night on the town: “I spent my night trying to score coke and weed for some of the *Times*’s reporters and editors. . . . I ended up in a housing project on Manhattan’s West Side buying coke from a dealer, and supplying it to the assorted group.” If what Blair writes is true regarding the ethics of a good number of staff members at the Times, then all the rest of us hard-working, rule-conscious journalists deserve sainthood.

What Times outsider knows how much of this is true? In

my view, we can probably assume that employees at the Times are no different from the kaleidoscope of fallible humanity they write about. So why automatically assume Blair is lying? There is of course his record as a confessed plagiarist and liar; he may well have elected to lie further in this book to salvage some degree of pride—and to deal out some retribution to an institution he still feels wronged him in some fundamental way. The ultimate soundness of this account can only be verified by Blair and his contemporaries at the paper. And, as with all disputed versions of events, readers will have to arrive at their own judgments, based on what they know of the record.

Despite such allegations and justifications, I was still left wondering why Blair graduated from “toe-touching” to outright lying about his whereabouts and plagiarizing. At the end of the book he attempts a bizarre explanation involving his fascination with convicted Washington area sniper Lee Malvo, whose case he covered for the Times. Blair’s theory is that what motivated Malvo involved the brutal slave past of his West Indian ancestors. Blair claims he was attempting to investigate such theories for a book he wanted to write, only to find himself placed on the paper’s stateside Iraqi War reporting detail. He implies that he began fabricating and plagiarizing out of frustration.

This may have been Blair’s motivation. Still, I found something incongruent here. There seems little doubt that events from Malvo’s past informed his murderous behavior. But to go all the way back to West Indian slavery as the principal cause is a slap in the face to the majority of West Indians who immigrate to the United States and do very well here. Blair may indeed have wanted to publish a book on Malvo, and certainly was tiring of his responsibilities at the Times. But solidarity with enslaved West Indians seems more than a little inapposite to such travails.

Blair’s account of what happened to him at the New York Times, and the inside dope he provides to readers about what allegedly goes on there, are anything but a boring read. Nevertheless, the book still feels like fast food: a bit of just-in-time scandal-mongering from a young journalist affected by the sense of entitlement that too many young Americans feel today. They’re convinced that they should “have it all” instantly (in Blair’s case, front page stories every day and a possible bestseller about Lee Malvo). After all, if Kobe can; and Mariah; and Eminem. . . . Why not a reporter at the New York Times? ■

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