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April 6, 2008 *Boston Globe* Article: "House of cards" by Drake Bennett

House of cards

The Boston Globe

By Drake Bennett, Boston Globe | April 6, 2008

The movie "21," which opened last weekend as the No. 1 box office draw in the nation, is a glossy action-adventure movie that adds sex, violence, and some theatrical high living to the plot of the book on which it is based. But readers of the book, the 2002 nonfiction bestseller "Bringing Down the House," might wonder why any embellishment was necessary.

The original book - "the inside story of six MIT students who took Vegas for millions" by counting cards at the blackjack tables - was juicy enough to spend more than a year on the hardcover and paperback nonfiction best-seller lists. And its runaway success transformed its Boston-based author, Ben Mezrich, into a local celebrity and a one-man publishing brand, a specialist in true tales of egghead kids pulling off acts of lucrative derring-do.

Yet "Bringing Down the House" is not a work of "nonfiction" in any meaningful sense of the word. Instead of describing events as they happened, Mezrich appears to have worked more as a collage artist, drawing some facts from interviews, inventing certain others, and then recombining these into novel scenes that didn't happen and characters who never lived. The result is a crowd-pleasing story, eagerly marketed by his publishers as true - but which several of the students who participated say is embellished beyond recognition.

"I don't even know if you want to call the things in there exaggerations, because they're so exaggerated they're basically untrue," said John Chang, an MIT graduate and one of the inspirations for the character Micky Rosa, who in the book is the team's founder and leader.

The book is vaulting back to prominence at a time of big scandals elsewhere in publishing, and low public trust in the media. Recent high-profile revelations of exaggeration and outright fabrication in memoirs have rekindled a long-running debate about how much massaging of the facts is acceptable in a nonfiction book. While memoirists are being publicly humiliated and dropped by their publishers for fabricating incidents in their own lives, the Mezrich empire is prospering, and the actor Kevin Spacey, a star in "21," is developing two more of Mezrich's books into movies. Yet some observers say "Bringing Down the House" - and other books like it - are precisely the kind of storytelling that most threatens the important line between what is real and what is not.

"When the public learns that a small piece of a supposedly nonfiction story has been fictionalized, they begin to doubt everything in that story, and when they begin to doubt a particular story then the doubts occur in their mind about whether they can trust any work, or any work of nonfiction," says Roy Peter Clark, a senior scholar at the Poynter Institute.

Editors and industry analysts say that with sales of fiction flagging, book publishers are pressured toward the genre of dramatic nonfiction. Much like reality television shows, the shift is fed by the sense that what audiences want is reality, but packaged with an excitement and drama that the original facts lack.

Clark says reality TV shows "are really using, and I would argue in many cases abusing, the strategies of traditional fictional storytelling. And I think the same thing is happening, and perhaps more so, on the book publishing side."

Both Mezrich and the book's publisher, Simon and Schuster's Free Press, see nothing to apologize for. The book, they point out, was published with a disclaimer (in fine print, on the copyright page) warning that the names, locations, and other details had been changed, and that some events and individuals are composites, created from other events and individuals. Nearly all the details and facts in the book were culled from his research, Mezrich says, and where they were compressed or creatively rearranged, the fundamental truth of the story he tells is undiminished.

"Every word on the page isn't supposed to be fact-checkable," Mezrich said. Most readers and writers, he said, have no problem with that.

It is of course impossible to say precisely what readers expect when they read Mezrich's book. Yet Mezrich freely admits that only one of the book's main characters, "Kevin Lewis," is based on a single actual person, an MIT graduate whose real name is Jeff Ma. And Ma's character does things that Ma himself said he never heard of until he read the book. Whatever readers expect from a work of nonfiction, it is unlikely to be this.

Though Mezrich claims that his techniques are standard practice in journalism and nonfiction writing, many editors, critics, and nonfiction writers strongly condemn these methods, and the frank justification Mezrich offers for them. "I just am not comfortable with that," says Robert Weil, an editor at W.W. Norton, of publishing books as nonfiction that have composite characters and altered timelines, "and I can't recall a case where I've done it."

To Gay Talese, a pioneer of dramatic nonfiction writing and author of nonfiction works like "The Kingdom and the Power" and "Honor Thy Father," the sort of liberties Mezrich takes with character, chronology, and plot are "unacceptable, dishonest, and I have little or no respect for people who do it."

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"Bringing Down the House" tells a dramatic tale. Led and trained by a slovenly former MIT whiz kid and teacher who had been one of the school's youngest-ever graduates, an elite blackjack team of MIT students uses a sophisticated card-counting strategy to prey on the country's biggest casinos.

On weekends, the book reports, the team members would board planes for Vegas with hundreds of thousands of dollars strapped to their bodies, or concealed in hollow umbrellas, laptops, or casts. The book even features an implacable, made-for-film-treatment nemesis, a man with "narrow ice-blue eyes" who team members come to believe is Vincent Cole, a private detective reputed to have once forced a card-counter, at gunpoint, to swallow a \$500 chip.

Yet the story doesn't match up with the recollections of the people who were the basis of the book. Five of the six main team members are amalgams of people who played on or managed various, occasionally competing MIT blackjack teams over the course of two decades. Instead of a tightknit group of six (and, later in the book, nine), players remember the team as a looser assemblage that at various times encompassed as many as 25 people, not all of whom were MIT students. Fourteen former players spoke to the Globe for this article; five of them were, at some point, on the team that was the primary basis for the team in the book.

Chang, the leader of the team Ma played on early in his career and the person whom the book's team leader seems most based on (none of the book's main characters' names are real), did not teach at MIT. And, far from being a young graduate, he took 10 years to finish college.

The stories of the team's cloak-and-dagger techniques for sneaking money around are even more curious. The book's narrative is interspersed with scenes in which Mezrich himself interviews certain characters. In one of them, Mezrich quotes Lewis describing the methods the team devised to smuggle hundreds of thousands of dollars in cash through airport security. The team had tried, Lewis says, fake umbrellas and laptop computers, plaster casts and hollow crutches, "James Bond kind of stuff." Eventually, however, they settled on strapping much of the cash to their bodies under their clothes in Velcro bags. Hollow crutches, Lewis says in the book, "are a lot harder to explain to the FBI than Velcro."

But Ma, the person on whom the Lewis character is based, said that he never described those techniques to Mezrich, or knew of anyone using them. Until he read the book, he said, he had never heard of them at all.

Similarly, the book has Lewis occasionally catching glimpses of the blue-eyed man shadowing the team. Accompanied by two goons, the man catches up with another character, Jason Fisher, in the bathroom of a Bahamian casino and has him beaten bloody.

But Ma says he never saw a man matching that description following them. Mike Aponte, who the Fisher character is largely based on, says he was never beaten up in a casino anywhere. And while some of the former MIT players interviewed for this story could remember instances of teammates being threatened by casino personnel, none could recall an actual beating. Of a dozen former players asked about the swallowed chip story, none recalled it, and some described it as implausible.

Near the end of the book, there is a break-in at the character Dylan Taylor's apartment that closely matches the real-life burglary of the apartment of Kyle Schaffer, the character Taylor was at least partly based on - but differs in a few important ways. In the book, \$75,000 is stolen, the hidden safe where it is kept literally pried out of the wall, and the reader is made to suspect that the theft could have been a betrayal by a team member or a message from Vincent Cole. In reality, Schaffer says, \$20,000 was stolen from his desk drawer. What's more, Schaffer adds, \$100,000 to \$120,000 in blackjack chips that had been sitting next to the money in the drawer was left untouched, strongly suggesting that the thieves had no idea of their worth.

"I am 99.9 percent sure that it had nothing to do with blackjack and was a lucky find for someone who was in the right place at the right time," said Schaffer, a Boston area investment adviser.

Mezrich's response to these specifics is to say that everything he describes is accurate, only that it didn't necessarily happen to the people, in the places, or at the times it occurs in the book. He had to change things, he says, in part to protect the identities of the people he wrote about. But he also admits that, as he puts it, "I took literary license to make it readable."

"The idea that the story is true," he adds, "is more important than being able to prove that it's true."

Dominick Anfuso, the editorial director at the Free Press and the editor of "Bringing Down the House," said that the factual alterations in Mezrich's work were driven by the need to protect the identities of the characters. "There was an obvious need for privacy of some of the people involved," he recalls.

But he said he is uncomfortable with the idea that an author would also change facts to tell a better story. "I don't think you should make the plot more exciting at the expense of truthfulness, ever," he said. Anfuso refused to provide a definition of the standards he uses to distinguish fiction from nonfiction, and did not return follow-up calls.

After "Bringing Down the House," Mezrich switched publishers, to William Morrow, an imprint of HarperCollins, and the disclaimers that come with his books have become more prominent. In his most recent book, "Rigged: The True Story of an Ivy League Kid Who Changed the World of Oil, from Wall Street to Dubai," there is a passage at the end of the author's note that warns readers about changed names, compressed time periods, and altered identities and backgrounds. Certain characters, it goes on, "are not meant to portray particular people."

Mauro DiPreta, the book's editor at William Morrow, says the disclaimer was inserted simply "to let the reader know what to expect in the book." What Mezrich does, he argues, is clearly nonfiction. "Sometimes reality is messy," he says. "I think it can be fine to streamline a story for narrative purposes."

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From time to time, there have been questions about the accuracy of Mezrich's writing. A 2004 Boston Globe Magazine article, for example, called his work "imaginatively enhanced nonfiction." Last month, a profile of Mezrich in Boston magazine raised more specific concerns. In the story, Aponte and David Irvine, another former MIT team player, said the team had never, as recounted in the book, trained in an underground Chinatown casino, used strippers to cash in chips, or relied on "shadowy outside investors." Nor had any team member ever been beaten up. Micky Rosa, they told the magazine, was a completely fabricated character.

Mezrich's defense of his methods has remained consistent. He began his career writing techno-thriller novels, and as a fiction writer, he says, "I learned the skills of plot and the skills of character." As a result, "when I set out to write a true story, I set out to write it in a way that people really want to read it."

"I don't think narrative nonfiction exists without composite characters," he adds. Iconic nonfiction books like Sebastian Junger's "The Perfect Storm," he says, would be impossible without them, and Junger is one his idols.

There are nonfiction writers, like the memoirist Vivian Gornick, who defend the use of composite characters. Sebastian Junger, it turns out, is not among them. "It's lying," he says. "Nonfiction is reporting the world as it is, and when you combine characters and change chronology, that's not the world as it is; that's something else."

Writing narrative nonfiction, authors will attest, requires an enormous amount of work. It's not merely a matter of discovering an event and writing about it, but gaining the trust of the participants, talking to as many of them as possible, learning the context, triangulating facts, and checking what can be checked.

"There is an art in nonfiction," says Talese, "but the art isn't the creative license one might take as a fiction writer. Rather it comes from digging deeply, researching exhaustively, writing in a way that makes it seem as if it is fiction but is founded in the most reliable of reportage and research."

Mezrich, by contrast, simply did not speak with some of the people on whom he based central characters of the book. Rosa, for example, he says is based on three men, including Bill Kaplan, who in the 1980s was the leader of the first MIT blackjack team, and Chang. But both Chang and Kaplan say Mezrich never interviewed them for the book. (Mezrich says he can't remember if he interviewed any of the three.)

Mezrich said he spoke to "literally hundreds" of people for the book.

But in using composites, virtually anything goes: So long as something happened to someone, it is thereby "true." Because Mezrich's subjects in the book are not public figures, and because he won't identify any of them besides Ma, it

is impossible to fully check his facts. If a person who recognizes a scene from the book says, as several do, that it has been changed, Mezrich can insist that the scene has simply been combined with another.

Just as Mezrich cheerfully acknowledges the liberties he took, some of his subjects embrace his version of their stories. One of them is Semyon Dukach, the hero of Mezrich's second blackjack book, "Busting Vegas." "I actually don't have a problem with Ben bending the truth," he says.

"Busting Vegas," in his opinion, is more accurate than "Bringing Down the House."

How accurate does that make "Busting Vegas"? "It's 90 percent true if you count things that happened to anyone," he says. "It's only about half true if you define it as actual things happening to the actual people they happened to."

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