

# Artful Deception

## If Ghostwriters Are Indispensable, Why Are They So Invisible?

*By Gregory Baruch*

*(Sunday, March 31, 2002; Washington Post, page B01)*

Historians who pass off other people's work as their own are widely condemned – just ask Stephen Ambrose or Doris Kearns Goodwin. College students who pay somebody else to write their term papers can be – and often are – expelled. Even the music industry – hardly a bastion of ethical sensitivity – stripped Milli Vanilli of its “Best New Artist” Grammy Award after it turned out that the photogenic lip-syncing duo wasn't actually singing the songs.

There's a word for it when you persuade people to pay money for something under false pretenses: fraud. When companies mislabel horsemeat as beef, or regular potato chips as fat-free, for example, they can be subject to lawsuits and criminal indictments.

But publishers seem exempt. These days, entire books are written by people other than their purported authors. Only it's not called fraud. It's called ghostwriting. And it's a common practice in the literary trade.

Publishers often claim in their own defense that “everybody knows” that celebrity books are ghostwritten. But if everybody “knows” that, why have publishers made it harder and harder for readers to find out who the actual authors are? Books that once would have been advertised as “by [celebrity] as told to [ghostwriter],” and later as “by [celebrity] with [ghostwriter],” are now frequently sold as “by [celebrity].”

The trend in favor of burying the ghostwriter in the acknowledgments is accompanied by another trend – to place the acknowledgments at the back of the book where even a vigilant reader is less likely to notice the information. In former education secretary Lamar Alexander's 1995 presidential campaign tract, “We Know What to Do: A Political Maverick Talks to America,” Alexander's ghost – veteran sportswriter Mickey Herskowitz – isn't even mentioned until page 198, on the fourth page of the acknowledgments. Even then, Herskowitz is the 83rd person to be thanked, after “Fred and Ernestine Montgomery of Henning, Tennessee,” “my great Aunt Sula,” “Dr. George Sweeting and the Moody Bible College” and “J.B. (Bronce) Henderson.”

In other cases, the ghostwriter doesn't even appear in the acknowledgments. Hillary Rodham Clinton's “It Takes a Village” was written with the help of ghostwriter Barbara Feinman – who fell out with Clinton over how she would be credited in the 1996 book. Moreover, according to a Time magazine article, Feinman was subject to a confidentiality agreement that prohibited her from disclosing her role (which did not, however, keep “sources on Feinman's side” from spilling the beans to the media). Senator Clinton is not the first public figure to rely on ghostwriters. Simon & Schuster's Michael Korda, the editor of the 726-page autobiography “Ronald Reagan: An American Life” (which was ghosted by writer Robert Lindsey), reports that the former president said, “I hear it's a terrific book! One of these days I'm going to read it myself.”

More recently, publishers have taken the practice a step further. Not only are there ghostwritten celebrity memoirs, there are also ghostwritten celebrity novels. One such example is “Swan,” the 1994 tale of a fashion model who is the victim of blackmail, supposedly written by supermodel Naomi Campbell. The publishers insisted that Campbell wrote the book, despite her apparent unfamiliarity with it. During an interview she admitted, “I just did not have the time to sit down and write a book” (although she did have time to promote it).

Campbell has company. Tennis star Martina Navratilova, for example, has put her name to a series of ghostwritten mystery novels about a crime-solving female tennis player. And the post-“Star Trek” career of William Shatner – Captain James T. Kirk of the Starship Enterprise – provides a glimpse of what could be the literary world of tomorrow. A 1997 profile in London’s Daily Telegraph recounted that Shatner’s “Los Angeles office turns out to be the nerve center of a fiction factory,” in which he keeps four writers on staff. “Shatner sketches out ideas and characters, sends the memo to his writers and they produce a 40-page synopsis for his approval.” The employees then write the novel, which Shatner vets. “I have some great writers,” Shatner told the Telegraph reporter, graciously.

At least Shatner recognized the value of his ghosts. That’s more than can be said for the creative forces behind “Bogart: In Search of My Father,” which the publisher, Dutton, sold as a memoir by Stephen Humphrey Bogart, the actor’s son. The ghostwriter, Gary Provost, died before the publication date, and Dutton removed his name from the 1995 book. The New York Times reported that the editor explained the decision in a letter to Provost’s agent: “You will notice that we decided not to put Gary’s name on the book but instead we’ll include a note on a separate page from Steve acknowledging Gary’s contribution. . . . [I]t is our belief that the book stands a much better chance if it doesn’t appear to be ghostwritten. Oddly enough, under the circumstances, from what I know of Gary, I believe this is something he would have wanted us to do.”

It wasn’t what Provost’s widow or his agent thought Provost would have wanted, though. They weren’t satisfied when the note “acknowledging Gary’s contribution” turned out to be a dedication page saying only, “For my father and in memory of Gary Provost 1944-1995.” In response, the publisher pointed out, “It never hurts to have a book like this appear as if it were actually written by the person himself.” After complaints from the Authors’ Guild, the publisher eventually added a “with Gary Provost” credit to later printings, though Stephen Bogart still did not include Provost among the 43 people he thanked by name in the introduction.

It’s one thing to use speechwriters; politicians have limited time and have to give lots of speeches. But nobody has to write a book. Yet politicians and businessmen – like pop stars and sports idols – keep bringing out products that make money off unwitting readers.

The practice is now so common that many people don’t even realize that it raises an ethical question. Entire companies are devoted to providing ghostwriters for businessmen, scientists and other inarticulate. When historian Ambrose was accused of plagiarism a few months back, some of his advocates defended him on the grounds that he probably wasn’t responsible because he delegates the preparation of large parts of his books to family members. Dan Rather and other journalists have put out ghostwritten books – in effect, claiming to be the authors of books they didn’t actually write – without losing credibility. But when Joe Klein wrote the best-selling novel “Primary Colors” and published it under the name “Anonymous,” he was accused of dishonesty for claiming not to be the author of a book that he did write.

One justification publishers have used for using ghostwriters is that the supposed authors have at least fully collaborated in the book. But in several cases prominent publishers have issued ghostwritten books that weren’t even written until after the supposed authors had died. One remarkable instance was when Simon & Schuster engaged Clay Blair – a respected military historian – to write the memoirs of retired general Omar Bradley. Unfortunately, when only the pre-World War II section had been completed, Bradley died. Blair was now the ghostwriter for a ghost. And he went ahead, undaunted. The jacket of the book, which came out in 1983, looked something like this:

## A GENERAL'S LIFE: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

By General of the Army

OMAR N. BRADLEY  
and Clay Blair

Blair doesn't appear to have felt exploited by the arrangement. In a "Collaborator's Foreword," he explained that the book was being published as an "autobiography" because "my own mind was so deeply immersed in Bradley's that I thought like Bradley . . . I feel certain that had Bradley lived to read the result he would not have made any substantial alterations or changes of emphasis." Another factor may have been that an autobiography would probably sell better than a biography.

Some publishers have extended this practice to professional novelists, giving new meaning, it has been said, to the concept of literary immortality. Some presses, such as Pocket Books and St. Martin's, have continued to churn out horror novels by V.C. Andrews and mysteries by Elliott Roosevelt long after those authors' deaths. In 1999, detective writer Lawrence Sanders scored a triumph when his novel "McNally's Dilemma" – promoted as the work of "one of America's most popular novelists" – hit the bestseller lists one year after his death. The only problem was that not a single word of the book was written by Sanders. His publisher – G.P. Putnam's Sons – had slapped his name some 10 times on the jacket and title page, as well as in its catalogue and advertising, while a tiny line in the middle of some fine print on the copyright page disclosed that: The "publisher and the estate of Lawrence Sanders have chosen Vincent Lardo to create the novel based on Lawrence Sanders's beloved character Archy McNally and his fictional world." On later editions, Lardo's name does appear more prominently.

There's not much readers can do about this epidemic of dishonesty. They could stop buying ghostwritten books – if they could only tell which those are. And they could ask the publisher for their money back (good luck!) when they find out that a book they bought was ghosted. But ghostwriting will probably continue to thrive until publishers and celebrities start paying a price for it.

And there are some proven risks in using a ghostwriter. Indeed Disney CEO Michael Eisner paid a hefty price for using one on his autobiography. When Jeffrey Katzenberg sued Disney for breach of contract in the late '90s, Katzenberg's lawyers subpoenaed the notes of Eisner's ghost, Tony Schwartz. The notes revealed that Eisner had told Schwartz, "I think I hate the little midget." The "little midget" (Katzenberg) won a sizable settlement.

But perhaps the most heartening example is what happened to Pamela Harriman, the late Washington hostess and U.S. ambassador to France. She enlisted Christopher Ogden to ghostwrite her memoirs in 1991, gave him 40 hours of interviews, and then dropped the project and refused to pay him. Ogden took the information he had gathered and wrote a muckraking 1994 biography, "The Life of the Party," which made the bestseller lists – under his own name. It was a rare, sweet instance of a ghost turning the tables.

*Gregory Baruch, a lawyer in Washington whose work includes unfair trade practices and copyright, wrote this piece himself.*

© 2002 The Washington Post Company

[www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A38888-2002Mar30?language=printer](http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A38888-2002Mar30?language=printer)