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Dan Mallory's unreliable narrative: how to get ahead in publishing

February 8, 2019 9.45am GMT

An extraordinary tale: Dan Mallory. EPA-EFE/Alejandro Garcia

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People across the global book trade have been engrossed by a ripe scandal engulfing one of their own – publisher-turned-author Dan Mallory, whose novel *The Woman in the Window* was one of the runaway bestsellers of 2018. One tweet summed up the buzz:

Author



Claire Squires

Professor in Publishing Studies, University of Stirling



Laura Williams

@laurabirdland

I love how everyone in publishing found the time to read an additional 11,000 words today. Imagine if we always had such productive Mondays. I might get a subscription to the *New Yorker*, they've earned it.

356 6:00 PM - Feb 4, 2019

29 people are talking about this

The comment from the literary agent Laura Williams refers to a lengthy article in the *New Yorker* about Mallory, who writes under the pseudonym A J Finn. As the headline explosively proclaimed, Mallory's life "contains even stranger twists" than his fiction.

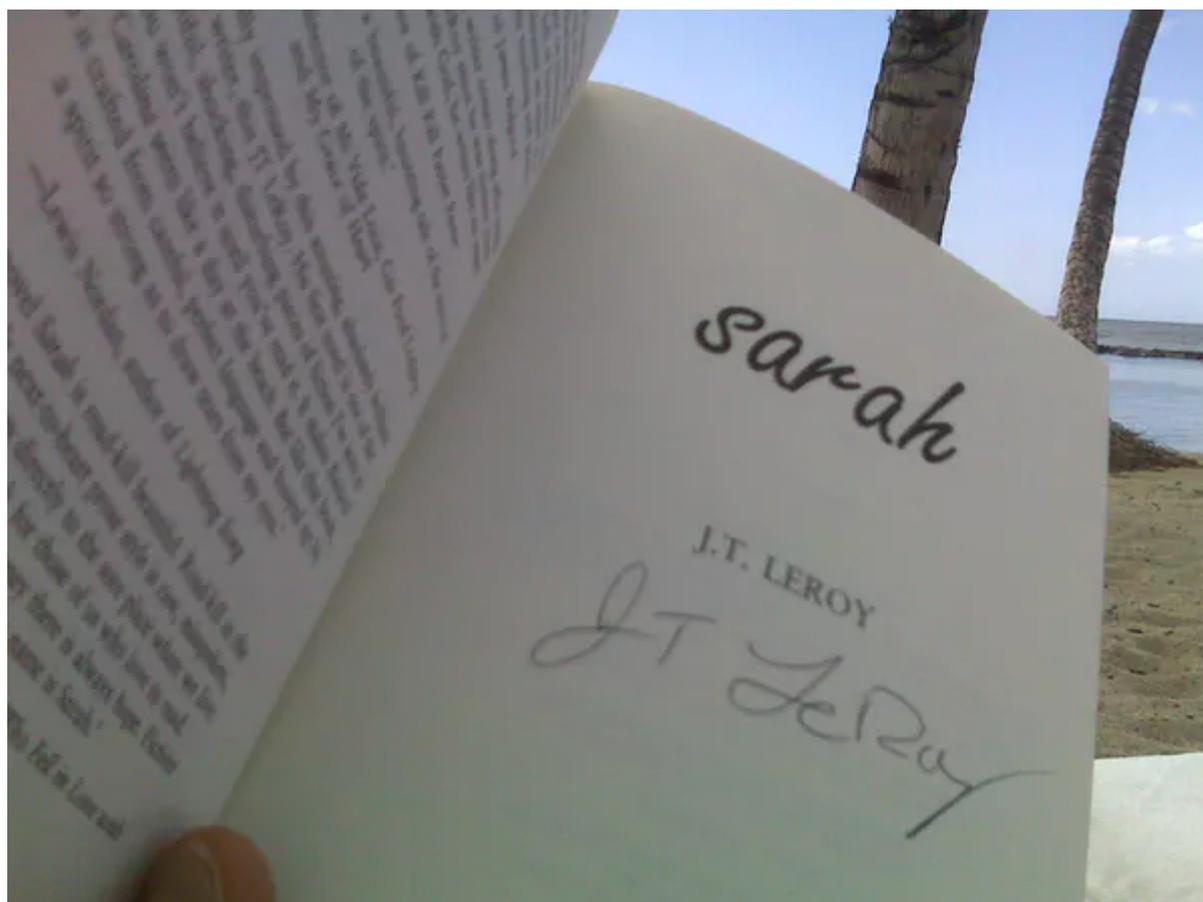
These twists, according to the *New Yorker*, include repeated lies: about his mother's death from cancer, his own cancer diagnoses, an Oxford PhD, a job offer from a rival publishing company which leveraged promotion. He also, the article suggests, may have impersonated his brother, sent abusive emails, and – most curious of all – left plastic cups of urine in the New York office of his boss ("messages of disdain, or ... territorial marking", speculated the *New Yorker* – although it went on to quote a spokesperson for Mallory saying he hadn't been responsible for that).

The article is careful to present evidence for these revelations via both named and anonymous sources, or to state that certain allegations are unproven. The revelations are either denied by Mallory, or blamed in a statement on “dissembling” produced by severe mental illness.

Even more curiously, Mallory’s uncompleted PhD focused on Patricia Highsmith, author of *The Talented Mr Ripley* – that twisty tale of a man who murders and then impersonates another. His own *The Woman in the Window* presents its readers with an unreliable first-person narrator who witnesses - or does she? - a crime.

An unreliable narrator – and an unreliable author? Literary liars and impersonators weave their tales through publishing history. Remember the “memoirs” of James Frey, *A Million Little Pieces*, which presented as fact made-up scenes of drug addiction and alcoholism?

Fiction-writing fraudsters also abound: prize-winning Australian Helen Darville falsely presented herself as the Ukrainian “Helen Demidenko” and wore peasant blouses to publicise her book: *The Hand That Signed the Paper*. Meanwhile JT LeRoy’s novelised tales of an abusive boyhood turned out to be entirely invented, their author represented in public by a (possibly) transgender impersonator.



Who is JT LeRoy? Brad Coy, CC BY

Literary hoaxers

Mallory joins an infamous line of literary hoaxers, then. But what might this torrid tale tell us about the mental and physical health of the publishing industry?

Social media commentators quickly identified an issue beyond the tricky questions of truth and lies: that of Mallory's rapid career trajectory. A "Waspy" family background was polished by an elite US college education, employment at a New York publisher, postgraduate studies at Oxford, a London publishing job and promotion. Then back across the Atlantic to a \$200,000 salary and a book deal brokered through his professional networks.

As one much-retweeted comment put it, alongside all the tawdry revelations of the story, it also spoke volumes about the problematic pattern of publishing career paths.



The New Yorker has multiple accounts of how Mallory seemingly charmed writers and fellow publishers, and there's no implication – other than light borrowing of plots and characterisation – that his writing is not his own. Good looks operated alongside that charm, until the beguilement revealed its multiple deceptions. But the question of how to get ahead in publishing, and those who get to make such rapid ascents, remains.

Glass ceilings, whiteness and class

Publishing and the literary world have serious issues of access and inclusion. The roughly equal number of men and women in board positions in UK publishing does not represent the preponderance of female staff lower down company hierarchies – about 66-80% of people in the industry are women, surveys variously report.

Unsurprisingly this glass ceiling creates a gender pay gap: 16% in 2017 and some even worse figures in 2018's mandatory reporting from larger companies. Publishing also has its sleaze and #MeToo claims.

In terms of ethnic diversity, a 2018 UK Publishers Association survey showed the BAME workforce of publishing to be under 12%. This is marginally below the 2011 census figure of 13% in England and Wales, but it's far below the 40% of London, where UK publishing is highly centralised (itself presenting issues of regional diversity).

Repeated surveys have demonstrated publishing's diversity deficit. Scholarship from Anamik Saha and Melanie Ramdarshan Bold focuses on the challenges of cultural production for writers of colour. Over a period from 2006-2016, Ramdarshan Bold identified, only 8% of young adult books published in the UK were by writers of colour.



Knights Of, who sidestepped traditional publishing by crowd-sourcing funding for a pop-up bookshop to sell diverse books. Knights of

Like other creative industries, publishing is a middle-class activity, with working-class publishers and writers frequently recounting stories of prejudice and cultural condescension – eg. in publisher Laura Waddell’s *Nasty Women* chapter, and in *Dead Ink*’s anthology of working-class essays **Know Your Place**.

The 2018 report *Panic! Social Class, Taste and Inequalities in the Creative Industries* shows publishing’s class demographic to be “especially grave”. Less than 13% of publishers are from working-class backgrounds, while more than 33% have upper middle-class origins.

The whiff of privilege

Such individual and statistical accounts of exclusion demonstrate why the wild story of one already-privileged individual bluffing his way higher and higher up the publishing echelons has caused so much consternation. If the story is true, Mallory repeatedly fooled university admissions offices and publishers’ employment processes. But what employment practices enabled him to rise, even when his story had started to unravel? And how did his apparent charm and good taste enable him to fail upwards? The answers to these questions remain in a dysfunctional swirl of rumour, anonymous sources, non-disclosure agreements and myth-making that probably won’t hurt Mallory’s book sales.

But there are wider systemic and institutionalised issues at play here: the urine scent-marking in the editor’s office (whether proven to be Mallory or not) is a metaphor for the regimes of value in operation within publishing. There is a mystique about taste – a whiff of privilege – that prevails unhelpfully and often prejudicially in the publishing industry. Such inequitable practices govern which hot new literary property we pick up next.

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