



True Story: Murder, Memoir, Mea Culpa

Michael Finkel

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In the haunting tradition of Joe McGinniss's *Fatal Vision* and Mikal Gilmore's *Shot in the Heart, True Story: Murder, Memoir, Mea Culpa* weaves a spellbinding tale of murder, love, and deceit with a deeply personal inquiry into the slippery nature of truth.

The story begins in February of 2002, when a reporter in Oregon contacts *New York Times Magazine* writer Michael Finkel with a startling piece of news. A young, highly intelligent man named Christian Longo, on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted list for killing his entire family, has recently been captured in Mexico, where he'd taken on a new identity—Michael Finkel of the *New York Times*.

The next day, on page A-3 of the *Times*, comes another bit of troubling news: a note, written by the paper's editors, explaining that Finkel has falsified parts of an investigative article and has been fired. This unlikely confluence sets the stage for a bizarre and intense relationship. After Longo's arrest, the only journalist the accused murderer will speak with is the real Michael Finkel. And as the months until Longo's trial tick away, the two men talk for dozens of hours on the telephone, meet in the jailhouse visiting room, and exchange nearly a thousand pages of handwritten letters.

With Longo insisting he can prove his innocence, Finkel strives to uncover what really happened to Longo's family, and his quest becomes less a reporting job than a psychological cat-and-mouse game—sometimes redemptively honest, other times slyly manipulative. Finkel's pursuit pays off only at the end, when Longo, after a lifetime of deception, finally says what he wouldn't even admit in court—the whole, true story. Or so it seems.

True Story: Murder, Memoir, Mea Culpa Details

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Morgan Williams says

This book starts out as a somewhat interesting look at what can happen to a journalist, or a writer of creative non-fiction, if they stray from the truth. He is, presumably, completely honest in his account of his disgrace with the New York Times, and his apparent willingness to help others avoid his mistakes is quite admirable. Unfortunately, the book quickly turns into the literary equivalent of one of those sordid television courtrooms, and his personal involvement with Longo overshadows whatever point the book was meant to have.

Juletta Gilge says

I will admit, I watched the movie first and loved it, so I decided to check out the book. I loved it too. It was so well done and easy to follow. This is a crazy story but worth the read.

Jennifer Willis says

I don't think I could accurately estimate the percentage of time I spent with my mouth hanging open or the number of times I exclaimed, out loud, "Oh, my God!" while reading this book. The sheer audacity and calculated rationalizing of Chris Longo -- the convicted murderer around whom this story revolves -- are at once both mesmerizing and horrifying.

"True Story" is the perfect title for this book, wherein the author struggles with the honesty/dishonesty of his subject, even as he comes clean about his own journalistic misdeed. I appreciate Finkel's sharing of his own circumstances, with a detailed explanation of how he came to be fired from the New York Times Magazine, rather than offering excuses and justifications for his behavior.

According to Longo, he and Finkel are both liars, almost brothers in their deception -- partially owing to the coincidence of Longo having assumed Finkel's identity while he was on the lam in Mexico. As Longo keeps spinning his yarns to Finkel in long letters, over the phone, and in prison visits, he never stops offering additional versions of the truth to convince Finkel of his sincerity.

Chillingly, toward the end of the men's association, Longo comments that it took, "two liars to make two people turn to a path of honesty." But what is honesty? Based on Longo's behavior and history, it seems that "truth telling" may be whatever partial, rationalized fiction will cast the narcissist in the best light or allow him to feel morally justified.

Sherry Chandler says

My son was assigned this book to read in an MFA class in nonfiction, and because he left it lying around, I

picked it up and read the first few pages. It is a very well written book so I continued reading to the end. But the longer I read, the more I wondered why I was spending my time reading the tale of two liars and why I should believe Finkel's assertions that his association with Longo had allowed him to reform himself when he had just told us all the times Longo himself had sworn himself reformed.

I suppose this is why I prefer poetry and fiction. You know those are lies. While they may serve a higher truth, at least no one is swearing to you that they've told you the stark truth.

Bonnie Faust says

Finkel is a disgraced journalist whose own hubris led him to lie about one of his stories about child slavery in Africa. Longo is a disgraced husband and father whose own narcissism led to the murder of his wife and three children and subsequent identity theft of Finkel (in name only, as an alias).

The two strike up an unlikely and tenuous friendship when Longo is arrested, and each uses this "friendship" to their own advantage. The result is an interesting study in the line between ego and personality disorder, and coping mechanisms we use to save face and deal with the consequences of our actions.

While one would assume Finkel holds the cards in their arrangement, it eventually becomes clear how he was used by Longo from the very beginning. Finkel's own introspective study and acceptance of his role in his downfall, both personally and professionally, provide an interesting mirror to that of the ultimate narcissist, a man so consumed with his outward appearance and fantasy life that he murdered the only people on the planet who actually loved him unconditionally.

Sarju Shrestha Mehri says

Omg! What a book! I picked this book because I saw the preview of the movie. Since it is based on true story I wanted to understand the story before it hits in the movie theater . I started reading the book three days ago and could not rest until I finished it.

This story is about a con man who is convicted of murdering his whole family, who performed many illegal work and impersonated a real New York Times journalist, Michael Finkel.

This is very interesting memoir from of the writer who falls from his own grace of journalism for falsifying a headline story and his a year long correspondence with the con/narcissists Christian Lango and their weird friendship.

Finkel does a good job on acknowledging his short coming and his embarrassment as a journalist in an honest way in this book. I felt his writing style of building up the storyline was great in making the reader stop and wonder, what the heck is wrong with these two people. I felt he worked really hard to find a way to comeback as a writer.

Also, this story is about husband and wife relationship and family members, lies and deceits, what drives people to do illegal work and continuously repeat over and over again. Overall, I am happy to see Finkel's life back as a writer. Every person should get a second chance.

Diane Yannick says

So, I started with The Stranger in the Woods, then backed up to read this one. Another fascinating story that I couldn't put down. Truth truly can be stranger than fiction. The utter audacity of Chris Longo boggled my mind. That he could murder his family yet carry on with his dramatic charade is mind boggling. After murdering his family, Longo impersonates Michael Finkel during his Mexican "vacation". The real Finkel had just been fired from the NYT for making a composite character and carelessly misidentifying a picture. (BTW, I am a total fan of this author who very clearly and without excuses explained why he was fired and took total responsibility for his missteps. He deserved this new project which came along at the exact right time.)

Many conversations and letters between Finkel and Longo are shared. If you just like to cut to the chase, you're not going to like this amount of detail. I was pleased to read and form my own opinions about Longo's mental state and actions. He was a liar, manipulator, thief, and murderer. Yet his unmistakable charisma and good looks allowed him to get away with much more than the average person. He could look someone in the face and lie to them repeatedly. Once caught, he had no plan other than violence. My heart broke for his wife and children. As the omnipotent reader, I wanted to warn them to run fast and far. I did believe that his wife gave him far too many chances and their Jehovah Witness beliefs clouded her vision.

I did not see the movie version of this story as I enjoy every word that Finkel writes. Perhaps that's a slight exaggeration but I will let it stand.

Darlene says

In 2017, I read a book called The Stranger in the Woods: The Extraordinary Story of the Last True Hermit written by journalist Michael Finkel and that compelling story stayed with me throughout the year. Looking for anything else Michael Finkel may have written, I found True Story: Murder, Memoir, Mea Culpa which is a mixture of things... part true crime, part memoir and also a story of redemption. To truly understand how this story came to be, it is important to provide some background.

In 2001, Michael Finkel was employed by 'The New York Times' and was pursuing a story in West Africa. The story he BELIEVED he would find was one of children selling themselves into slavery on cocoa plantations; but as it turned out, that WASN'T the story he found. After numerous interviews with boys working on the plantations and with plantation owners, what he discovered was NOT child slavery but extreme poverty and deplorable living conditions. Upon his return to New York, he realized after meeting with his editors that he did not possess the story they wanted him to write. Fearing the loss of his job and the end of his career off he could not deliver the story his editors wanted, he created a composite character to use in his story and ran this story with a photo of this composite character... which happened to be a photo of one of the very REAL boys he had interviewed... a boy by the name of Youssouf Male. Mr. Finkel's deception was discovered and he was subsequently fired by 'The New York Times' for violating journalistic ethics.

Interestingly and coincidentally, on the day that 'The New York Times' announced that Michael Finkel had been fired, he received a phone call from a reporter in the state of Oregon who informed him that a man named Christian Longo had been arrested in Cancun, Mexico for the murder of his wife and three young children.... and what's more, he had been using Michael Finkel's identity. Mr. Finkel was dumbfounded but also intrigued and the seed of an idea began to form in his mind. This was an incredible story... perhaps it

was a story which could rehabilitate his reputation and save his career.

And this background sets the stage for an incredible story I could NOT put down.....

Michael Finkel requested an interview with Christian Longo at the Lincoln County jail in Oregon where he was incarcerated while he was awaiting trial and to his surprise, Mr. Longo agreed to see him. The two men would continue to meet, talk by telephone and exchange letters during the months leading up to Mr. Longo's trial. I began to develop a picture of who Christian Longo was... or maybe I should say that I THOUGHT I began to form a picture of the man. In retrospect, perhaps all I really knew about the man were the basics.... he was from a middle class, religious family from Michigan. He married his wife, Mary Jane when he was just 19 years old and started a construction clean-up business and he and Mary Jane had three children.. Zachery, Madison and Sadie. His business was not successful but as he had been living far beyond his means, he could not allow anyone to know of his failure. This business failure led to his writing counterfeit checks and renting a car illegally which he then drove out of state with his family and ended up in Oregon. This series of events seemed to culminate with the murder of his wife and children in December of 2001. But what really happened?

Although True Story: Murder, Memoir, Mea Culpa has been described as a game of 'cat and mouse', it didn't take long for me to realize that it is impossible to know which man was the 'cat' and which was the 'mouse.' My impression is that the dynamics between Christian Longo and Michael Finkel became quite complicated. Because Michael Finkel was narrating the story, all the information the reader obtained was filtered through his eyes but I believe it would be fair to say that both men were engaging in a bit of self-serving manipulation. Obviously, Mr. Finkel wanted badly to resurrect his damaged journalism career and needed Christian Longo to confide in him.. to tell him what really happened to his wife and children. And after reading this entire story, I came to the conclusion that Mr. Longo was also attempting his own manipulation. He needed to be able to convince the court that his arrest had been a mistake... that he was really a good guy who loved his family, tried hard to give them a good life and would never harm them. If he was able to test his story on Michael Finkel and convince HIM of his innocence, then maybe he would have a chance of convincing the court. Having said all of this, I also have to say that Christian Longo and Michael Finkel DID seem to develop some sort of bond or relationship during their many months of communicating. Perhaps it wasn't friendship exactly but I do think they became comfortable with each other.

Did Christian Longo strangle his wife and youngest child and throw his other two children off a bridge in Oregon in those early morning December hours? And what did the court in Lincoln County ultimately think of his story? I don't want to spoil what eventually happened in this case.. read the book!

I have to admit that Christian Longo seemed charming and likable and I think Michael Finkel felt much the same way.... and that becomes a kind of dilemma for society. If this charming and likable person could also be a lying, manipulative murderer, how do we ever feel safe? Society often feels the need to separate ourselves from people who do terrible things.. they somehow become 'other' or less than human.. monsters. But as Michael Finkel points out.. whether we want to accept it or not, they ARE human and possess the same sets of chromosomes we all have. Obviously, there are no good answers to this dilemma... but plenty of questions to ponder.

I don't feel I can wrap up my review of this book without mentioning the redemption aspect of this story. I know from reading several online reviews that there are plenty of reviewers who do not believe Michael Finkel's contrition over his lying in his 'New York Times' story is sincere. I have a different view. Of course, only Michael Finkel knows what he truly feels and for some people, no act of contrition on his part will ever convince them. I agree that he should not have lied in his 'New York Times' article and he DID violate his journalistic ethics; and given the negative feelings toward the media, it is understandable that many people

do not trust or believe him. But I happen to think that his story also raises questions about the state of investigative journalism and perhaps it also says something important about society.

Michael Finkel began with the intent of investigating the modern-day slavery of young boys in West Africa. He did not find evidence to support THAT story; however, he did find a different story.. a story of extreme, soul killing poverty. It wasn't perhaps a sensational or titillating story... but it WAS a story of hardships so severe that young boys worked in horrible conditions for just a few pennies per day and the owners of these plantations were no better off than the boys they employed. But 'The New York Times' knows its readers and they believed their readers would not be interested in a story about extreme poverty. Maybe our society is too easily entertained and distracted by that which is sensational or fantastic and we feel we must avert our eyes from that which makes us feel uncomfortable, powerless or even angry. So yes, Michael Finkel violated his journalistic ethics but I feel this story is much more nuanced and complicated and provides much to think about.

I hope Micheal Finkel continues to write such thought-provoking stories... I will be reading them.

Apparently, Hollywood was as enthralled with this book as I was. They made a film about it in 2015 called 'True Story'. Christian Longo was portrayed by James Franco and Micheal Finkel was portrayed by Jonah Hill. If you're interested, here is the official trailer....

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y_NiP...

Aditi says

Waste of money.. everything sounds like a lie. Recently it's movie adaption compelled me to buy this book, unfortunately the book is not that worthy or anything delightful to read about. I mean who wants to read about a smart-ass manipulative mass-murderer who killed off his whole family of three children and a wife. In fact the author doesn't sound so real, I mean he was trying to prove his worth to his fans. But I tell you, it didn't work! Anyhow, the protagonist put me off!

Sean says

The story is interesting enough, but there's only so much ego-stroking I can handle.

Finkel and Longo, the two narcissists at the center of the story, have more in common than I think Finkel cares to acknowledge. Their story shares the same narrative. In a work of fiction, I would consider this an interesting layer to the story. One is a mirror of the other. But this isn't fiction. These two people exist.

Finkel views True Story as his redemption story. Through the trial of Longo, he learns the dark side of himself and realizes the impact of his deceptions. But just like Longo, he's putting forth a version of events with a purpose. Every suspicion he shares about Longo could apply to himself. He doesn't acknowledge any of this, though. Ultimately, this attempt at redemption seemed insincere. It was a second attempt at Finkel

using a deceptive narrative device to get back in the public's good graces.

Erika Nerdypants says

I wanted to not like this book, really, I did. What's to like about the story of a husband brutally murdering his wife and three small children, especially when that story is told by an investigative reporter fired from the New York Times for falsifying details of a cover story? And yet, there is no denying that Michael Finkel wrote a page turner here, that's riveting precisely because this is the meeting of two, in the end very similar narcissists. Because if there is one thing Finkel does in telling Chris Longo's story, it is expose himself. This is a fascinating account of what two men, primarily obsessed with themselves and their own status and reputation call "friendship", but what really turns out to be a cat and mouse game, where as the reader I couldn't be sure who was using whom and for what purpose. Sadly, the truth about what exactly happened to Longo's young family never emerges, and if you're looking for answers as to why this tragedy occurred, this is not the place to find them.

Sam Quixote says

It's fair to say that Michael Finkel had a pretty dramatic 2002. He went from being an award-winning journalist working at the prestigious New York Times to a publicly disgraced pariah whose career was suddenly in the shitter! How? In a story about child slavery on West African cocoa plantations, he had tried to pass off a composite character as a real person and got found out. Then, in a call from an Oregon paper that he assumed was about his scandalous breach of journalistic ethics, he was asked about the murders of a woman and three children committed by New York Times journalist Michael Finkel! Whaaaaaat?!

The old adage "truth is stranger than fiction" certainly applies to this book! True Story is the bizarre and thoroughly compelling account of how Michael Finkel fell from grace and then immediately got wrapped up in the case of Chris Longo, the young Jehovah's Witness who strangled his family in December 2001, fled to Mexico, where he told people that he was Finkel, before being caught by the FBI and brought back to the States to face justice.

The book is an original blend of memoir and true crime masterfully written in the nonfiction novel style pioneered in Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*. Finkel's scandal/confession/mea culpa though, while interesting in itself and adding a unique dimension to the narrative, only takes up a relatively short part of the book as it could be covered much more succinctly than Longo's crimes, the latter obviously being the main draw anyway. I can see why it was included as both Finkel and Longo are revealed as liars albeit to very different degrees. Finkel's lies were minor and benign and he's clearly learned from his mistakes while Longo's lies led to the deaths of four people.

Finkel's portrait of Longo is utterly mesmerising. A charming and likeable man with a magnetic personality, Longo is also a narcissistic pathological liar who is acutely sensitive to how people perceived him – he had to look like a success to everyone, especially his wife Maryjane – with a complex about his intelligence (though the reader can see his limitations from the direct quotes from his letters showing misspellings, poor grammar and a pretentious use of complex words to impress his audience).

Longo was completely incapable of living within his means. Like a car crash in slow motion, you can't turn

away as his failing construction company's finances and his own out-of-control spending leads him to compound lies with more lies before escalating to stealing cars and counterfeiting cheques. Things get worse and his behaviour becomes more erratic: he cheats on his wife, the pressure of constantly hiding the increasing chaos from family and friends begets more lies, more theft, more fraud, causing him to up stakes and flee with his family across America, desperately trying to stay one step ahead of creditors and law enforcement... until it finally all fell apart and overwhelmed him.

Longo on the stand during the trial is the most gripping section as we see his true nature emerge. I found the unvarnished audacity with which Longo brazenly lied to be completely breathtaking, revealing himself to be this irredeemable, warped, almost inhuman creature. Not just during the trial but afterwards too, the way he continued trying to futilely manipulate Finkel and reality with more and more lies, despite their contradictions.

There wasn't much I disliked about the book but it definitely dragged a bit in the middle. There's a part where Finkel and Longo fall out and waiting for Finkel to win back Longo's favour was tedious. And, while the final months leading up to the murders was entrancing, a lot of Longo's bio was boring – his courtship with Maryjane, building his business, his everyday life; very banal stuff.

Otherwise, *True Story* was an excellent and remarkable read - a morbidly fascinating and memorable tale of a deeply disturbing criminal, a horrific crime and the flawed but penitent journalist documenting it all who was inadvertently caught in the maelstrom. True crime fans will love this and I can easily see this becoming a classic of the genre up there with *In Cold Blood*.

Mary Frances says

This book is most interesting for the way one narcissist, the author, tells the story of his relationship with another, the murderer/ con man Chris Longo. Over and over in the book I find these insincere comments by the author about his fictional article that got him fired from the *New Yorker*, about the lies he tells to his subject which he tries to justify while "regretting" the lies, about his insincerity with others. It's kind of fascinating in that regard. As a comprehensive study of either man, it fails in depth and insight. I'm also fascinated with the very average quality of the writing, from a man who was considered good enough that the *NYT* published a number of his articles.....

♥ Marlene♥ says

Disgusted!

This book made me feel awful about the world today. So 2 lying nasty narcissists both got what they want. Longo was given a friend and someone he could tell all his lies to and him staying in control which is very important for men like him. Then the author gave this horrible man a voice. He let this man lie to him and even wrote all his lies down as if they are true!! He befriended him and liked him and that says enough to me.

Even Longo's mum warned him that everybody at first thought Longo was a nice guy but that he was a liar. Finkel did not want to help the prosecutors. No he was on the side of the defendant.

What also angered me was the judge. That he allowed Longo free speech for hours and hours where he could again tell his fairy tale lies in his own sweet time and was again given a podium. I feel so sorry for the family of his victims.

Only when he got to see the picture of poor Mary Jane's face did he realise who the real Longo was? Not before? Ha! No only when he got what he needed then only then he pretended to care about the victims!!

So now the author was rewarded by the world with sales for his book but that was not enough both men got what they want the most out of all, A movie about them.

I am so pissed off. A book filled with lies that are supposed to be the truth. The author never assumes that this fairy tale might not be true. The only thing he doubts are the killings.

Two lying scumbags that formed a friendship. Both using each other. Both only for their own gain. Both not caring about the victims, the families of the victims.

Simon Cleveland, PhD says

3 of 8 people found the following review helpful:

What's one man's demise is another's redemption...or is it?, June 2, 2006

Michael Finkel wrote this book in an effort to alter the popular opinion that he is a dishonest reporter who falsified his articles. He wrote with one objective in mind - to emerge as a talented author and honest human being. But was he able to do so? It's up to the readers to decide.

What's the book about? As it turned out, a serial murderer used Mr. Finkel's identity to hide from the law. Luckily, the FBI did their job and caught the man. And when Mr. Finkel found out that his identity has been compromised for nearly a month, he saw an opportunity to use the story as a stepping stone toward redemption, toward purification of his own public character.

The book is written well, but having read it, I wouldn't recommend it. For one thing, it does little to reveal something new about the character of the murderer. It simply affirms the man's deceitful nature. And I could care less about Finkel's correspondence with the murderer. There were times when I felt like I was reading a gnostic gospel- an account of lies between two corrupt men = the dishonest journalist and the two-faced murderer - what a pair.

If anyone is interested in the story, the Internet is a perfect source about Longo's biography. Use it, don't waste your time with the book.
