



The Ghost Writers

BY FREDERIC F. VAN DE WATER

Up from anonymity comes this writer to tell of the joys and sorrows of literary ventriloquism, or the secret of why so many prominent people have been bursting into print.

I HAVE been a beauty specialist. I have been a social secretary. I have been a dowager with twelve generations of Manhattan aristocrats behind me, and a secretary of state, and a surgeon-general of the United States and many others.

I never have been president yet, but I have been several United States senators and I was, also, early in my career, a tong-leader of Chinatown for a few memorably uncomfortable hours.

The tong-leader was my first literary impersonation. His name was Cheng Wong. He had a jack-o'-lantern face, the loudest voice that ever commented during an aria, and a celestial streak of stubbornness. I overcame this last by the persuasions of a detective acquaintance, plus five dollars of a cub reporter's meagre salary. I was young and just barely holding a job, under a city editor whose greatest delight seemed to be to think up assignments impregnated with misery for the assignee.

"L'Oracolo" was having its premier at the Metropolitan. Why not, the city editor asked me, take a tong-leader to see this opera of San Francisco's Chinatown and have him write his impressions afterward? His question was purely rhetorical. I did not try to tell him any of a hundred good reasons why not. I needed my job. So I took Cheng Wong to the opera.

I had explained to Cheng that he

was to dictate his opinion of the production. He elected to do so while the performance was going on. He liked Scotti and said so. Every one within ear-shot, which included practically every one in the building, said: "Sh-h-h."

He didn't think much of the Chinese procession, and the supposed ideographs on the banners and signs didn't mean anything. He told me this in the voice of a fearless critic, and a purple-faced gentleman behind us rose and went up the aisle, muttering and glaring threats over his shoulder. I followed, leaving Cheng to whatever fate awaits a fat tong-leader who talks out loud during a Metropolitan performance.

I do not know whether he returned intact to his smoky, bare office in Pell Street. I hope not. His estimate of "L'Oracolo" appeared in the paper next morning, written in a cub reporter's approximation of a Chinaman criticising an Italian opera in New York. It must have been a ghastly piece of work, but it saved me my job. I got a five-dollar raise, which made twenty in all, and I had taken my first false step toward the career of a ghost writer.

So, I understand, they call him now. He has become so prevalent during the last decade that he had to be named. The ghost writer is a problem over which The Authors' League of Amer-

ica debates, and the numbers of his cult grow like a tabloid's circulation. He writes articles, essays, autobiographies, even books on technical subjects—I have done a solemn work on psychoanalysis, though a doctor's name is on the title-page—and some celebrity, when the work is finished, claims it as his own. The ghost writer brings authorship within reach of all.

There are two main reasons, I believe, for his increase, over and above a hack writer's primal desire to make money. One, and the less important, is an editor's wish to see his magazine's issues studded with big names—big names of any variety, just as long as they are big. He yearns for articles by famous authorities, commenting upon conditions, crises, advances in their chosen fields. Left to themselves, such persons would produce work typical of authorities, technical, clumsy, impossible from the popular periodical viewpoint, or else decline to write at all.

But an editor approaches the admiral of the navy, the discoverer of a new serum, the motor magnate, the social leader, the play-producer, the inventor, and, making peace signs and propitiatory gestures the while, wheedles:

"If you'll let us have an article" (or a series or the reminiscences of a busy life), "we'll send a good man to help you get the stuff into shape."

And the great man accepts the "help," which any ghost writer knows is an inadequate word. "Help" in cases like these consists in doing nineteen-twentieths of the work.

The gentle art of counterfeiting authorship is a bar-sinister outgrowth of the old-fashioned newspaper interview, which usually followed something like: "Mr. Blank, when seen at his home, 11,111 Park Avenue, last night, said:"

Following that colon, the reporter presented something purporting to be the subject's own words, cleansed of imperfect grammar, cleared of incoherence, toned up, and made dignified. He did not head his story "By Adolphus Blank," but the magazine ghost writer does. So does the modern reporter, for that matter, whenever possible. Home-run hitters, pugilists, hockey stars write for the press, but the number thereof who actually put pen or pound type-writer-key to paper can be counted on the fingers of one hand with three or four digits left over.

Reporters are ghost writers now and then. Syndicate men are ghost writers often. "Public-relations counsels"—some people still call them "press-agents"—are ghost writers most of the time. These and the magazine men are the crutches on which celebrity limps to authorship. More accurately, they are the wheel-chairs in which the famous are carried, flaccid, inert, into print.

I have written as, possibly, a score of persons. I believe that at least five out of eight articles, supposedly penned by the unliterary great, actually have been composed by silent partners who did the work. Of all the folk whose stuff I have written, only one, a senator from the far West, actually did anything toward authorship beyond talking to me and approving the completed product. He set down in outline what he wished to say. I expanded it into five thousand words.

Some of the more scrupulous magazines protect themselves from a faint flavor of forgery by affixing, after the bold "By John Doe," a meek and small-type anticlimax: "As told to Richard Roe." Here the actual author emerges faintly from obscurity. Generally the

ghost writer is invisible as the spirits of the departed.

There is a second reason, quite as important as editorial lusting after big names, behind the rapid growth of the trade of ghost writing. This is humanity's persistent thirst for gossip.

Inventions that shrink the size of the world also minimize the individual. No one is lonelier than the average urbanite in the midst of newspapers carrying despatches from all nations of the earth; the radio, bringing echoes from Vancouver and London; the telephone, the telegraph, the airplane, and the motion-picture. Science in its campaign for human improvement has not supplied a substitute for the vanishing general-store cracker-barrel conference or the back-fence slander session.

Men and women have shivered for the warmth of intimate contact with their fellows. They have thirsted for the draughts of that aromatic wine of scandal which complex mass civilization has been de-alcoholizing. Man cannot live by the bread of sober journalism and censored radio programmes alone. He wants gossip—elemental, full-flavored gossip.

He is getting it now, thanks to the tabloid newspapers and the magazines, particularly the "confession" magazines. In these latter the ghost writer flourishes like the first personal pronoun in an actor's conversation.

It may be that sin-scorched souls actually find surcease and a check by writing their experiences for one or the other of the many periodicals specializing in anonymous confidences. I know several men and one woman who work steadily and profitably, turning out confession after confession. One man, in particular, does nothing else, and prospers. In a single week he has pre-

pared for appreciative editors and a gossip-hungry world the following:

The confidences of a cabaret singer and why she lost her job; of a former waitress in a sinful Park Avenue apartment and how she got there; of a country girl who came to New York and ended in the care of the Salvation Army, with particular attention to the intervening steps; of a wife and the great wrong her husband's stenographer did her.

My friend is, I suppose, the most prolific author in America. He does not get ten cents a word and his name is not famous, but he makes money. Any one, having industry, a reasonable acquaintance with the English language, and the proper—or improper—fictional slant, can. It is not the highest form of ghost writing, but it pays.

Editors of some better-class magazines sneer at the scandal publications and copy their strategy in part. They welcome confessions, though they may demand a certain foundation of fact. I have done mythical confidences, on order; not the crass, hurried stuff the cheaper publications print, but semi-fictional revelation that still was semi-authentic.

I talked to a woman with social experience for a total of not more than four hours and expanded her conversation into five articles wherein an imaginary social secretary revealed the bawdy extravagance of society. My only contact with the élite theretofore had been brief professional association with a dowager whose pungent reminiscences eventually were embodied in a volume of which she wrote no single line until she autographed a copy for me. Yet, despite my second-hand information, the magazine that published the confessions of my social secretary

was afflicted with letters from folk of standing in society. These complained that they or their kin were being lampooned and made utterly false guesses concerning the anonymous author's identity.

Also, I once did the life story of a beauty specialist. It was not my idea. An editor afflicted me with it. "Affliction" is not hyperbole. I had a hideous time finding material until I ran upon a perennially young newspaper friend, who confided that she had just had her face lifted. Would she help me with the articles? She would—for a consideration. I have never been closer to a beauty-shop than the outer plane of the plate-glass window, yet my reminiscences must have been true to life. Two firms of which I never had heard wrote threatening libel suits.

Nor was that all. For months I received letters, addressed in care of the magazine, "To the Author of 'Skin Deep,'" from women who confided their blemishes and wished my advice. A ghost writer is an elemental form of literary life who can change his authorship's sex at will. I had written as a woman. When the letters poured in I was aghast at the unreticent breadth of femininity's freemasonry.

These semifictional, anonymous revelations are the pleasantest and most profitable form of ghost writing; pleasant, because whatever story-telling facility you possess has free rein; profitable, because your informant has no name to sell. Generally he is content with a small portion of the profit. Names count. Names also cost. Celebrities whose articles you write often demand a fifty-fifty split. Additionally, they are harder to handle.

The dowager whose name is blazon-

ed on the back of a book I wrote was my most difficult venture. Others had sought to tap her really monumental knowledge of New York society and she had quarrelled with them all. She was irascible, immensely proud, amazingly sensitive, with the most impressive assortment of scandalous reminiscence I have ever encountered. She was a grand old lady. I grew to love her with the apprehensive affection a trainer might feel for his lion.

She endured me at first because we both had Dutch names, and then she liked the first article I wrote for her.

"I've only written down what you've said," I pointed out, which but for the exception of recasting, reorganization, and a most liberal deletion was approximately true. She was pleased.

"Really?" she smiled. "Well, I have always believed I could write."

I wrote, I think, ten articles in all. She penned no single line, but she came to regard them all of her own exclusive authorship. From "our articles" she soon relapsed into "my articles," and later into "my book." I believe she was sincerely convinced she had done them all by herself. It did not irk me. A ghost writer cannot afford pride of that sort.

I heard a former pugilist speak at a luncheon. His reminiscences had been running in a magazine—clumsy, rather vivid articles, such as an intelligent prize-fighter might put together. He prefaced his address by saying modestly:

"I'm sorry I don't speak as well as I write."

I knew the editor who had bought the articles. I knew the man who had done them. He had lifted ghost writing almost into the province of art by ac-

tually writing the way the ex-prize-fighter talked.

He had accomplished his job so well that the subject believed he had done it himself. This, I have found, is a prevalent psychosis among pseudoauthors. To them the ghost writer seems something mechanical, a device whereby their own thoughts are transformed into print. If they haven't any opinions, they accept those supplied as their own.

A moving-picture comedian thought he was simply a good comic until the man who writes most of Hollywood's literary efforts did an article for him. Since then he has regarded himself as an exponent of bitter satire, portraying the aimless futility of life. It is not his own idea. He found it in an essay he never saw until it was completed and brought to him to sign.

This literary ventriloquism, this uttering of words in the voice of a celebrity, requires skill, tact, and a trace of that quality that makes for success in portrait-painting. It is the most specialized field of ghost writing. Many magazines have on their staffs an expert or so in this line.

And they must be expert. They must be able to estimate in an hour or so of conversation with a celebrity what the subject would say if he could, how he would say it, and how much additional he will stand for. Furthermore, they must be able to evolve a coherent and interesting magazine article out of talk that is almost always vague and sometimes utterly dull.

One member of the craft, not so long ago, was trying to write the autobiography of a heavyweight pugilist. It was tough going, for the fighter's mind was in harmony with the rest of him. He was pure heavyweight. He talked slow-

ly, reluctantly, and entirely platitudinously. It was like trying to weave romance out of the facts in a time-table.

"Look," the ghost writer said desperately. "Tell me something about your childhood. Remember anything interesting about that?"

For an instant the heavyweight pondered.

"Yeh," he conceded. "I had a dog. His name was Prince."

"Ah-haa!" the other burred. "Now we got something! What kind of dog? What did he do? What became of him?"

"I dunno," the fighter answered. "I had him; that's all. He was a dog. His name was Prince."

And that was all there was to that story.

Once I tried to wring material from a senator. For some reason, to me still incomprehensible, a magazine wanted an article from him on his trip to China. I sat in his office and pumped desperately, and the harder I worked the more air I brought up. Eventually he too grew aware we were getting nowhere and began to fret. I told him I had enough for his article, and left. I had his itinerary and little more. Yet, by grace of an encyclopædia and a newspaper morgue, I prepared an interesting, if entirely specious, story of his journey and brought it back for his approval.

"I don't think," he told me when he had read it, "that I could have done it better if I'd had time to write it myself. Only here's one thing: you make me say, 'China is collapsing into the pit from which she was digged.' I think 'dug' would be better, and it should be 'in' instead of 'from'—'the pit in which she was dug,' eh?"

"'From' makes better sense, and it's a quotation, anyway," I demurred.

"'In' is what I meant to say. If you quoted me correctly, it was a slip of the tongue, that's all," he insisted.

"Sure," I said, and cut the sentence out entirely after I had carried the approved article away.

The qualities demanded for successful practice of the older, more reputable professions all are required of the good ghost writer—presence, training, ability. Its ethics are still foggy and, I imagine, faintly reprehensible from the view-point of abstract morality.

The literary ventriloquist commits technical fraud, but a fraud that leaves every one satisfied. It is a game in which nobody loses. The ghost writer gets paid, which is pleasant. The celebrity who can't write also gets paid and sees himself in print, which is doubly pleasant. The public is gratified to read what the great person thinks or is not unwilling to pose as thinking.

And ethics are beginning to seep in—witness the explanatory "as told to Richard Roe" attached to ghost writings by some of the more reputable magazines. There is, however, it seems to some of us, room for further improvement. Ghost writers, now and then, commit something more than technical fraud by receiving pay from an editor for writing an article by a pen-bound celebrity and getting further

cash from the celebrity himself for landing him in print.

Sometimes this situation evolves quite spontaneously. I once wrote the autobiography of a woman who had attained a considerably important political office. The work was filled with edifying aphorisms concerning honesty and the salutary consequences of introducing into legislative chambers the atmosphere of the American home. It was not a bad piece of work. The so-called author liked it.

"I hope," she said when she had finished reading it, "that your editor will print this. It will mean a great deal to me next November. Get it across if you can, won't you? Do this for me and I'll send you whatever he pays me and a little present besides."

I look back at that moment with a smug satisfaction not usually accompanying recollection of my past impolitenesses.

I have written under numerous names belonging properly to the famous. I have attributed to them turns of phrase, nifties, even opinions, they were unable to think up for themselves. I have done my share in the great American industry of deluding the public, but, all in all, I think I have been a pretty good literary ventriloquist.

Maybe, after all, not so very good. It's a poor ghost writer who reveals the literary supernatural.





A Good Husband Remembers

BY WILLIAM C. WEBER

WELL, well, so that's what was in the package. How many years was it? Five . . . ten . . . Hardly faded a bit. Not a moth-hole in them, either. Shake out the creases and the crumbs of cedar-shavings and they could be worn to-day . . .

He had always wanted a blue shirt. One day when he was a boy on his way down-town to high school a man had swung on the trolley-car and stood on the platform kidding the conductor. The man wore a blue shirt with the collar turned up and a black tie. He was good-looking, and when he looked into the car the schoolgirls giggled. His black cloth hat had a hard visor and a flaring peak. It stood up like a knight's helmet. But it was the blue shirt that made him. He talked about it at home that night and his father and mother laughed at him. Only those grimy fellows that worked in Baldwin's and wop laborers and ditch-diggers wore blue shirts. Don't be silly.

Ever since he went out of blouses he had worn madras. Eighty-five cents when the stores had a big sale—sometimes a dollar or a dollar and a quarter. That was high, though. White with blue or green or lavender stripes or dots, and soft cuffs that his mother turned for him when they were frayed. He wore the madras shirts for a long time. It was after he was married that he stopped—one Tuesday night when his wife laid them all out freshly ironed on the bed. All the stripes and dots, spick and span, some cuffs smooth, some just beginning to fray, some rag-

ged and ready to be turned. There were too many of them and he had worn them long enough and he was sick of them. The next day he went out of the office at lunch and bought a white shirt at a sale, and the next day he wore it. The sleeves were too short . . . he hadn't got on then to the way some of those gyp sales were worked . . . but it was a change.

He had been married about two years then and he was just beginning to be almost satisfactory to his wife in the way he dressed.

She didn't object to the striped shirts. Her father wore madras and they were cheap, so that was all right. But his colored socks and his striped ties and his brown suit and checker-board cap didn't go at all. They had quite a time over the ties and the cap. But he didn't like to fight, so he wore the loud ties on Saturday afternoons when he pushed Junior's go-cart around the square, and he hung the checker-board cap in the cellar to use when he put out the ashes. He wore a dark-gray felt hat and plain-colored ties and a gray Oxford suit to the office and his wife was satisfied. So when he bought the white shirt he was just a little worried about what she might say . . . Some of the stories he cooked up and the way she bored through them . . . But she really said very little except to complain about the cost of it, even though it was from a sale, and about the short sleeves, and to warn him that it would soil quicker than the striped ones, and he couldn't have a shirt a day in the wash, and he