

# Waste of Times

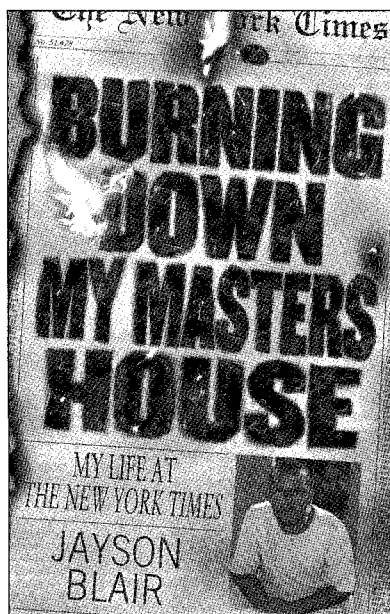
How Jayson Blair blew the chance of a lifetime.

By Stephen Pomper

At one point in his new memoir, *Burning Down My Masters' House*, disgraced *New York Times* reporter Jayson Blair reflects on his troubled final days at the paper: "I wished someone like the nun from the movie *Airplane* would walk in and slap me and tell me to get a hold of myself." If only she had, she might also have told him not to write this book. Memoir is just a bad genre for journalistic frauds like Blair and contemporary fabulist Stephen Glass, whose recent *roman à clef* about *The New Republic* was widely panned. These guys have already misled us, betrayed us, and wasted our time. Why should we sit still for another read?

Blair's answer is that his book was motivated by a higher purpose, that he wrote it "in the hope that others who are teetering on the precipice of self-destruction will pull back before it is too late." That sounds like a nice sentiment, but in practice it proves to be completely bogus. The book offers no useful guidance to the young stressed-out professional who might find himself out on a similar ledge. Instead, it throws the author a 300-page pity party, glamorizing his psychotic excesses and heaping calumnies on his former supervisors and colleagues, as if they haven't already suffered enough for his presence in their midst.

But before getting into the full wretchedness of it, let's take a step back to appreciate the big picture. In case you missed all the excitement last



**Burning Down My Masters' House:  
My Life at The New York Times**

By Jayson Blair

New Millennium, \$24.95

spring, Jayson Blair was a young black reporter whose elaborate fabrications, plagiarisms, and other misdeeds dragged *The New York Times* into a major scandal and ended the brief editorship of Howell Raines. *Burning Down My Masters' House* is Blair's effort to tell his side of the story; and to be fair, that story is neither wholly implausible nor even wholly unsympathetic. For example, it does seem likely that Blair was drawn to journalism out of idealism and was disappointed by some of the things he found at the *Times* (such as the paper's arguably distant and spotty coverage of the city's non-Yuppie population).

Also, it's no doubt true that Blair's bosses were often demanding (as well as unfair and even wrong) and that the *Times* newsroom was a tough place to work. And I absolutely believe that Blair was a manic depressive who managed his manias with booze and drugs, and that after he went sober those manias drove him into a fugue-like state in which he ultimately self-destructed.

But, let's face it, most of this stuff falls into the "that's life" column, and none of it remotely qualifies as an excuse for Blair's failings at the *Times* or, for that matter, in this book. Blair may not have had the easiest hand to play, but he held more than a few good cards that someone with a bit more character could have played a whole lot better. Not the least of these was a remarkably understanding employer. For all the darts that Blair hurls at the *Times*, the paper comes off as a supremely tolerant place, where Blair's minor transgressions were treated as idiosyncrasies (it became an office joke that he would steal a company car for days at a time, racking up huge parking fines) and where his major failings were treated with great humanity. When Blair owned up to substance-abuse problems, the *Times* didn't fire him: It found him counseling. When Blair's correction rate spiked, the Metro desk reduced his workload so he could concentrate on quality. And when the game was finally up and his deceptions were revealed, the paper still displayed great concern for his well-being—dispatching friends to look after him and helping to arrange a short hospitalization as a precaution against suicide. Short of pink-slipping him much earlier, which would have been a true mercy, it's hard to see what more the *Times* could be expected to have done for Jayson Blair.

But unfortunately Blair, who still seems to be operating in something of a narcissistic delirium, can't see it that way and wants very badly to assign the *Times* at least some portion of responsibility for his bad acts. Thus, he forces the reader to wade through pages of quotidian employee grievances that wouldn't rate a mention in *Dilbert*. On page 91, Blair disagrees with his editor

about how a story should be covered. On page 106, Blair's editor makes an unreasonable demand. On page 134, Blair gets stuck with a lousy beat. On page 215, Jayson is reprimanded, perhaps unfairly. Do you get the picture?

Actually, you probably don't because—as if the tedium weren't bad enough—Blair's narrative is also mined with little chunks of spite and malice. One editor is described as having a "borderline personality." Another has all the warmth of "a petrified piece of wood." Colleagues who made the mistake of joining Blair on his drug escapades have the pleasure of reading about it in hardcover, their identities only thinly concealed. A dear friend is quoted as suggesting—with, it is implied, some hilarity—that she would like to shoot Howell Raines in front of his seven-year-old son. And Blair pointedly notes that managing editor Gerald Boyd was "raised by his grandmother after his mother died following a long struggle with drugs"—which might qualify as an especially nasty piece of personal disclosure except for the fact that it's not true. (After Blair's book came out, Boyd confirmed that his mother actually died after a long struggle with sickle-cell anemia.)

By this point you may be asking yourself, do I need this? The answer is no, nobody does. Not the reading public, not *The New York Times*, and certainly not Jayson Blair, who would be well advised to fade (really, it's time) from the public square. As for those future Jayson Blairs whom the book is supposedly trying to counsel, the media will just have to figure out better ways to nip their transgressions in the bud. Certainly the *Times* has taken a step in the right direction by engaging a public editor who, like *The Washington Post's* ombudsman, is charged with imposing a level of internal quality control on the paper. And if that doesn't work, well, there are always other options. I personally favor Blair's *Airplane* solution. Sometimes, it would seem, you just have to call in the nun.

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# Golf Balls

## Fighting Lou Gehrig's Disease on the PGA Tour.

By Ron Rapoport

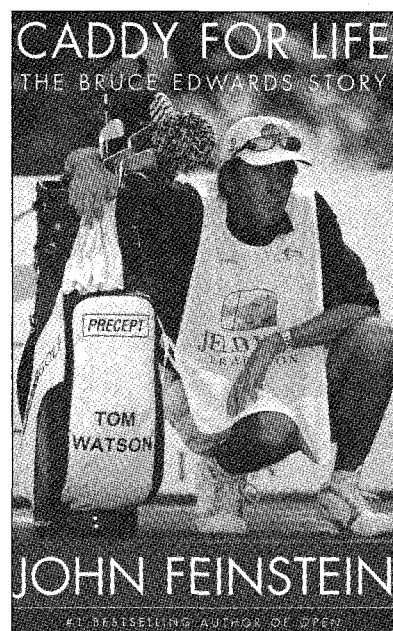
**J**ohn Feinstein, who has done perhaps as much for golf writing as Arnold Palmer has for golf, puts down his driver in his latest work and delivers instead a lovely little pitch shot dead to the hole.

Feinstein chose broader themes in his earlier books on the sport: the pleasures and the pains of playing on the professional tour (*A Good Walk Spoiled*), a history of the four most important tournaments (*The Majors*), a behind-the-scenes look at the preparations for the U.S. national championship (*Open: Inside the Ropes at Bethpage Black*).

In *Caddy for Life*, Feinstein gives us nothing more ambitious or less compelling than the story of a golfer and his caddy, and of how, after more than two decades of a successful, easy going boss-employee relationship, they suddenly found themselves facing catastrophe.

The golfer is Tom Watson, who was, in the interregnum between the supremacies of Jack Nicklaus and Tiger Woods, the greatest player in the world. The caddy is Bruce Edwards, who was unknown to the public but a popular figure on the pro tour and, because of his long relationship with Watson, a giant to his peers.

Then, early last year, Edwards was diagnosed with the crippling



### Caddy For Life: The Bruce Edwards Story

By John Feinstein

Little, Brown, and Company; \$25.95

disease ALS (Lou Gehrig's Disease), and as the word spread—and as he and Watson shared a moment at the U.S. Open that would have shamed any Hollywood scriptwriter who dared to imagine it—their roles were reversed. Before Edwards died on the first day of this year's Masters in April, Watson began carrying the load for him.

Feinstein takes his time with this and to good effect. Two-thirds of *Caddy For Life* takes place before