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The Press Corps Exacts Its Revenge

By JIM SLEEPER

By any standard, I ought to be one of the many journalists who are enraged that Newsweek columnist Joe Klein lied to us so long and so vehemently about his authorship of "Primary Colors," the best-selling *roman à clef* that dramatizes Mr. Klein's understanding of Bill Clinton's inability to lead. I was one of the first writers to insist that Mr. Klein's literary fingerprints were all over the novel, his distinctive moral pitch and social sensibility as unmistakable as his turns of phrase. The same "CBS Evening News" producers who broadcast his unequivocal denial ("It wasn't me; I didn't do it") taped me saying the opposite—but never ran the footage.

So why isn't my blood boiling? Because what troubles me is not so much that Mr. Klein lied, but why. He didn't do it primarily to goose sales and profits, to protect a source, to avenge himself on a White House "where he was not wine and dine" (as New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd thinks), or just to have a little fun at his colleagues' expense. Even though he may well have done all of the above, I think the real reason he lied was to hide the truth that he was pumping both facts and fictions about Bill Clinton into our political bloodstream.

Mr. Klein knew perfectly well that in writing "Primary Colors," he was "lying" not only by concealing his authorship but, more fatefully, by inventing facts, as any writer of a *roman à clef* does, in this case to reinforce truths about Mr. Clinton that

he'd evoked in such well-grounded columns as "The Politics of Promiscuity." There, he'd wielded hard evidence brilliantly to depict a president who is so eager to ingratiate himself in every encounter that, ultimately, there is no "there" there. Not content with that remarkable achievement, however, Mr. Klein decided to sharpen the public portrait he'd painted of Mr. Clinton by brushing into it a few vivid untruths of the sort that are vital to a novelist but off limits to a journalist, even one with a license to commit punditry. That was dishonest. It is unethical for a journalist to litter the campaign trail, anonymously or not, with both serious reportage and fabrications.

One might retort that Mr. Klein was off duty as a columnist while writing the novel, like an out-of-uniform cop getting drunk and beating up the guy at the next bar stool. But this impressive, almost glandular moralist wasn't off duty; indeed, he believed he was doing his duty by imputing to Mr. Clinton all sorts of emblematic tawdriness that he hadn't witnessed or "sourced," but only imagined. It is precisely because Mr. Klein knew that most journalists define their "duty" less grandly than he does that he lied about his authorship. But, on this terrain, a duty less grand is much to be preferred. Were Oliver Stone to announce, for



Joe Klein

example, that sober political commentary has become his new calling, some "infotainment" outlet might hire him, but no thoughtful citizen would give his reckonings much credit.

Mr. Klein's situation is more complicated than Mr. Stone's would be, of course: He began as a journalist, not an *auteur*. He understands the difference between fantasy and advocacy—as Mr. Stone and some muckrakers to Mr. Klein's right and left, like Wayne Barrett of the Village Voice, do not. This has made him more reliable than they. But now he has propelled fact and fiction along separate but converging tracks to drive into the public mind a single moral message about the same public figure. He lied to make sure that the novel would reinforce, not undermine, his journalistic commentary on Mr. Clinton—to make sure, in other words, that what was fiction in the hands of a novelist could not be characterized as propaganda in the hands of a pamphleteer.

Some of the angry journalists who condemn Mr. Klein for lying about his authorship are really just paying him back for his explicit, well-justified contempt for their own myopic, sometimes fanciful coverage of politics, markets and race. But now that they have denounced him as something less than a journalist, Mr. Klein, a prescient social critic and formidably talented writer, has a chance to be something more. He can rise from the table he has shared with Ms. Dowd and Mr. Barrett and take a seat instead with Honoré de Balzac and Anthony Trollope, novelists who, like him, wallowed in the mire where politics and punditry mix before transmuting their experience into fiction more compelling than the day's news. It was nearly a year before Mr. Klein was found out as the author of a novel that is powerful enough to confirm P.B. Shelley's dictum that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world. But even if Mr. Klein wanders over to the table of H.L. Mencken and Walter Lippman, I hope they'd offer him a seat.

Mr. Sleeper, a former New York Daily News columnist and author of "The Closest of Strangers: Liberalism and the Politics of Race in New York," is at work on a new book about race.

By William F. Powers

Washington Post Staff Writer

What you gonna do now that Vermeer's left town? I suggest you repair to the Feb. 19 issue of the Nation and catch Arthur C. Danto's graceful pursuit of the Dutchman. Danto, a professor emeritus of philosophy at Columbia, appears in the magazine about once every six weeks, and for me is one of its great draws. His pieces are at once erudite and readable, and seem to hew to no particular critical ideology other than thoughtfulness.

Here is how the Vermeer piece begins: "An object is perceived as beautiful, according to Kant, when we experience it as purposive without our being able to say in what its purpose consists. This famous, obscure thesis formulates nearly to perfection the enigma of beauty in the work of Johannes Vermeer, whose paintings seem fraught with a kind of meaning they also refuse to disclose."

His lengthy discussion of one of the most memorable paintings in the show, "A Lady at the Virginal With a Gentleman," is positively balletic. The Nation recently emerged from the make-over shop with an attractive new design, a major improvement over the old look. If you can't find this issue on the newsstands, call 212-242-8400, Ext. 206, for a copy.

Mother Lode

The April issue of Mother Jones brings two pieces well worth checking into. The first is the inaugural edition of the Mother Jones 400, a list of the country's top 400 political contributors. The big surprise is the identity of the No. 1 money man. Bill Gates, you might think? Dwayne Andreas? Nah. He's a 90-year-old Ohioan named Fred Lennon who has to be the most obscure billionaire around.

Also notable in this issue is a piece on the environmental effects of shrimp farming. It leaves the reader expecting that one of these days we may see an eco-boycott of shrimp cocktails, Forrest Gump notwithstanding.

An Ordinary Joe?

Now that all inhabitants of the Potomac planet have weighed in (endlessly) on "Primary Colors," may we suggest that the 17 people still fascinated by this riddle now contemplate two little words? *Joe Klein*.

He's the Newsweek writer whose name has



already been floated right here in the Style section. At the time, alert sleuths noticed that his denial wasn't exactly a denial: "I am Spartacus. All of us who are accused of this should stand up and say, 'I am Spartacus.' And share the royalties."

Klein's alibi was that he's been terribly busy these last few years, and he issued a curious, awkward theory on who might have written the novel: "I don't know, someone I have talked to."

Then he seemed to fall right off the hot list. Now it's time to swing the spotlight back to Klein, thanks to what I call the Kusnet-Sleeper Theory. Last week, the Baltimore Sun published a little-noticed article by a former Clinton speechwriter named David Kusnet, who fingers Klein. Kusnet writes with such authority that one begins to think he's read the whole novel, an eccentric move that hasn't occurred to most Washington speculators.

Kusnet bases his guess on Klein's background as a New York political writer, his disillusioned-lefty politics, his "gutsy and sometimes goofy" writing on race (one of the novel's themes), and his known views of several politicians who appear in the novel in transparent guises. "He's been critical of Cuomo, dismissive of Dinkins and disappointed by Clinton," Kusnet writes, and so is the novelist.

Yesterday Jim Sleeper, a veteran New York columnist and book author, called me to say that after reading the Kusnet column he pulled out "Primary Colors" and started reading a little more closely. The signs are unmistakable, he said, from the large ideas to the little stylistic touches. On Page 281, for instance, Sleeper noticed something that he considers a Klein tic: humorously shocking information followed by the one-word sentence, "Yikes." (A search of Klein's bylines shows he last did this in Newsweek on May 15, 1995.)

In the novel, the "Yikes" comes after a paleo-liberal female character makes some well-intentioned, mega-patronizing remarks to the black

narrator. Sleeper says, "The moment I came to that word 'Yikes,' I said, 'That's Joe.' And the 'Yikes' was about a *bête noire* of his, a particular kind of liberal New Yorker that he loves to skewer."

"Yikes" is hardly a new coinage. But there are other crucial little facts about Klein. That he is represented by Kathy Robbins, the mystery novelist's agent, for example, and has been covering national politics long enough to know the terrain of this book. This novelist seems to care a lot about music; Klein wrote a biography of Woody Guthrie.

But the most convincing evidence for Kusnet-Sleeper is to just read Klein. His prose has some of the same rhythms, his Clinton journalism the same jaded overtone, that one hears in the clever Anonymous. And Klein's interests are very close to those of this novelist, whoever he is. As this week's Klein column reminds us, he is fixated on the president's character. After noting that Clinton's recent statements, particularly the centrist State of the Union speech, have been welcomed by Catholic voters, Klein writes: "Clinton, however, remains Clinton. Which means that he could be off tomorrow, stroking any one of the constituencies that helped drive Catholics from the fold—the lifestyle liberals and racial panderers, the teachers' unions."

Sound like Anonymous on Gov. Jack Stanton?

Or maybe we're wrong again. At Newsweek, one of the novel's characters is widely thought to be an unkind sendup of Klein. "No," said a Klein colleague, who requested anonymity. "That's all I can tell you. You can knock me over with a feather if he wrote it. There's not one person around here who even vaguely suspects that it's Joe, and that's the truth."

And late yesterday, Klein (in Iowa for the caucuses) left a message for The Post's Linton Weeks: "I don't know *anything* about it." I'm still watching him.