



STRANGE

BUT TRUE

HOW MIKE

FINKEL'S LIFE

BECAME A
MOVIE

BY CAREN LISSNER



Given its dramatic twists and turns, what's most surprising about the fact that Michael Finkel W'90's life has been turned into the new film *True Story*—

produced by Brad Pitt and starring Jonah Hill and James Franco—may be that it's taken 10 years since he wrote the book version ["Arts," Jul/Aug 2005] to make it to the big screen.

To put things into context, back then two-time Academy Award nominee Hill, who plays him in the movie, was just getting noticed as "eBay customer" in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*; Franco was between stints as Harry Osborn, the bad guy/best friend in the Tobey Maguire *Spiderman*; and Brangelina was just becoming a thing.

The story of *True Story* starts with a bizarre coincidence: Finkel, a star journalist with a clutch of *New York Times Magazine* cover stories to his credit, is getting dismissed from the *Times* over fabrications in one of them—effectively destroying his identity as a writer. Within days of his firing, he learns that a man named Christian Longo, wanted for the murders of his wife and three children in Oregon, had been calling himself "Michael Finkel of *The New York Times*" while on the run in Mexico.

By then Longo has been captured and sent back to the US. Finkel writes letters to the killer in prison, and manages to strike up a relationship, and embarks on a memoir as a way to revive his writing career. The film explores the implications of their connection, as well as Finkel's romance with the woman who would become his wife—and her concerns about Finkel's interactions with the killer.

The film premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in Utah in February and was

scheduled for general release in late April (after the *Gazette* went to press). Early reviews have been mixed, with some critics praising the thoughtful treatment of the material, and others saying the director didn't quite pull it off.

"If this all sounds like red meat for philosophers and ethicists at the movies, it certainly is. It doesn't, unfortunately, make for crackling cinema," wrote Jordan Hoffman in the *Guardian*. But *Variety*'s Peter Debruge wrote, "In [director Rupert] Gould's hands, the two thespians [Hill and James Franco, as Longo] deliver measured, soul-searching work. Both Finkel and Longo found in one another a much-needed confessor, as well as a potential redeemer."

Finkel says he "never in a million years" expected his life and career to end up on the silver screen.

Before they did, he was a scrawny Jewish kid from Stamford, Connecticut, who was on the varsity track team at his high school. He ran in the Penn Relays and took a shine to Franklin Field, which helped him decide to apply to Penn. He also had a head for business—he netted more than \$20,000 in profits dealing in baseball cards—and chose Wharton as his school at the University, majoring in finance.

Neither choice stuck, though. Finkel quit Penn's track team after two years, and by the time he graduated, he "didn't want to do a single minute more of finance," he says. "I think I learned what I didn't like in college."

Finkel had written for his high-school newspaper, and midway through his Penn career, he joined *The Daily Pennsylvanian*. He covered sports, with a predilection for long-form stories—"I thought I could learn more about the human experience through soft features than hard news," he says—and also wrote for *34th Street*.

(Coincidentally, his editor there was Larry Smith ASC'91, who—besides creating the "Six Word-Memoirs" publishing phenomenon—is the real-life model for the character Larry Bloom in the Netflix series *Orange Is the New Black*, which is based on the memoir by Piper Kerman, Smith's wife.)

Finkel was also a *DP* columnist, pouring out his bleeding-heart liberal views on topics ranging from Philly's homeless to inherent racism in the yearbook, and a co-founder of the Wharton Democrats.

What set Finkel decisively on the path to a professional writing career, he says, was taking the nonfiction course taught by the legendary Nora Magid ["The Nora Network," Mar|Apr 2013] in his senior year. Magid famously encouraged her charges to aim for publication, to send out their work to magazines and newspapers.

Finkel submitted a story—about his reluctance, as a skinny kid in high school, to change for gym, and how his love of literature distracted him from his own, er, shortcomings—to the *Times*' "About Men" column, addressing his cover letter to the (male) editor, Leslie Gelb, "Dear Mrs. Gelb." The faux pas didn't hurt: "Wet Behind the Ears" ran in *The New York Times Magazine* and was Finkel's first big literary paycheck. "Mike got a thousand dollars from the *Times*, and an A from me," Magid told a subsequent class.

After graduation, Finkel moved back to Connecticut, waited tables, penned stories for the *Stamford Advocate* at \$15 a pop, and sent resumes all over Manhattan. An avid skier, he landed an associate editor slot at *Skiing* magazine for \$18,000 a year. He moved into a \$1,500-a-month apartment in New York with former *DP* Managing Editor Randall Lane C'90. (At the time, Lane had an entry-level fact checking/reporting job at *Forbes*. After a series of his own sometimes hair-raising adventures in journalism, Lane is now back there as the magazine's editor.) The gig at *Skiing* was "the perfect job for me," Finkel says. "Anything that could be written about skiing, was."

He also published a long story in the *Sunday Times* Travel section about a cross-country biking trip he took with Bret Parker C'90, a friend and fellow *DPer* who is now the executive director of the New York City Bar Association. Within a year, Finkel was offered a low-level editorial staff job at *Sports Illustrated*, but turned it down. "I'm not a good editor. I want[ed] to write," he says.

After 20 months in Manhattan, he moved to Montana. He had fallen "in absolute love" with the region when he and Parker rode through southwestern Montana on their bike trip, he says, and he was also inspired by John Steinbeck's descriptions of the state's natural beauty in *Travels with Charlie*. "When I stand among the mountains," he explains, "I feel at home."

Though he'd resigned his staff job at *Skiing*, he continued to write features for the magazine that took him to places like Iceland, Iran, and China, and one on skiing Mount Kilimanjaro. He also had a column, "Alpine Circus," for which he did "odd stunts" like skiing down a runway truck ramp or on a volcano in Mexico, and visited offbeat locations like the "smallest ski areas in the United States."

And he proved adept at pitching short travel-pieces to the *Times*—writing about topics ranging from his love of getting a haircut in foreign countries, to the fact that he brought his Frisbee and played with strangers everywhere he traveled.

Still, however rich in experience, those were "lean times" financially for Finkel. The *Times* pieces, for example, only brought in a few hundred dollars each. "It didn't matter if I was only eating peanut butter and jelly," he says. "I must like it. I must love it, actually. I've always been extraordinarily interested in a lot of things. I've been careful not to have a specialty."

His author's bio after a 1998 travel essay read, "Michael Finkel writes frequently about travel and unusual sports." However, he soon began carving out a niche with stories that put him into dangerous situations.

A signature piece was one he wrote for *POV*, a well-regarded but short-lived young-men's magazine Lane founded in the late 1990s ["Start Me Up," May 1998]. Finkel spent a month on an Alaskan crab fishing boat, considered one of the most dangerous jobs in the United States, with 26 times the fatality rate of the average

US worker. Finkel survived, but later described the experience as "horrible" in the *Gazette* article about the magazine.

In a story for the *Times*, he squeezed into a tightly cramped boat of Haitian refugees bound for the US. Passengers were sick from dehydration by the second day, but luckily a Coast Guard ship caught them heading toward a shallow reef. Finkel's story about the experience was well received, and the *Times* made him a contract writer. On assignment in the Gaza Strip, he ducked into the trenches to avoid gunfire. After September 11, he was sent to cover the US invasion of Afghanistan for two months.

"I have a certain style of adventure that appeals to me," he says. "The riskiest thing I do is drive a car, statistically. People thought of [my job] as risky. I thought of it as interesting. Part of me enjoys when there's a bit of danger. It focuses me. I feel very much alive."

Finkel was thriving, writing for *National Geographic Adventure* and *Sports Illustrated* as well as the *Times*.

Then, one day, he made a bad choice.

It only happened once. For a story about the child slavery trade on cocoa plantations in West Africa, he interviewed several boys but didn't find the evidence he was looking for that they had been physically abused. Under pressure to deliver a certain sort of tale, he combined several boys' stories into a composite character. After a relief agency complained and Finkel was forced to admit one of his factual errors, the *Times* sniffed out the rest of the lies in the story and fired him in early 2002, publishing a terse note about his dismissal.

The *Times* looked carefully and found no similar problems in Finkel's other stories, which sets him apart from notorious serial fabricators like fellow *DP* alum Stephen Glass C'94 ["Through a Glass Darkly," Nov|Dec 1998] and fellow *Times* writer Jayson Blair. Nevertheless, his career was ruined.

"I have no talent in the world except listening to other people and writing their stories," Finkel says. "I fucked it up. I blew it. I imploded."

It was at this low point that his life became intertwined with that of Christian Longo.

He first heard about Longo when a reporter from the *Oregonian* called look-

ing for a comment about the fugitive who had used his identity while traveling through Mexico to escape his crimes.

Longo, 27, had killed his wife and three children in December 2001. He was not a career criminal, but his business had started to go bad. He began trying to cover it up, then decided to start over. He strangled his wife and daughter, dropped his other two children into the bay, and escaped over the border, posing as travel writer Mike Finkel. He even befriended and slept with a female photographer while pretending to be Finkel. The FBI caught Longo and brought him home.

Finkel was eager to talk to the alleged killer. Longo's lawyers had forbidden their client from speaking to the media, but Finkel handwrote Longo a letter and sent it to prison.

In the book, he describes their weirdly comic conversation when Longo eventually contacted him. Skeptical that he's talking to the "real Michael Finkel," Longo starts quizzing him on details from his *Times* stories. Things look doubtful when Finkel can't remember the headline for his last published story (editors come up with those, not writers, he explains), but he saves himself by quoting correctly from the opening paragraph.

Over time, the pair began corresponding with letters that numbered, collectively, in the thousands of pages. They also spoke regularly on the phone.

And Finkel began writing his book.

"Of course I took advantage of it," Finkel says. "I was fighting for my career."

But Finkel wasn't *just* using Longo for a book. As with the subjects he'd written about previously, he was fascinated.

"I didn't want him to be guilty, with every fiber in my body," he says. "The scariest thing about Longo is, there's nothing scary about him. You could call him on the phone right now and he'd make all kinds of jokes."

But despite his wish that Longo was innocent, Finkel was "99 percent sure" he wasn't. Eventually, Longo confessed to Finkel that he'd committed all four murders. The media diagnosis was that Longo had narcissistic personality disorder. Those with the disorder may seem charming and successful, but they lack empathy and are capable of dangerous acts.

Finkel's 2005 memoir, *True Story: Murder, Memoir, Mea Culpa*, retraces his

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Jonah Hill as Finkel and James Franco as Longo in a scene from the film.

own journalistic sin and fall from grace and the path that Longo's life took, as well as the relationship that developed between the two men.

"In this astute and hypnotically absorbing memoir, Finkel recounts his subsequent relationship with the accused, Christian Longo, and recreates not only Longo's crimes and coverups but also his own," wrote *Publisher's Weekly* in one of a number of rave reviews.

An excerpt ran in the June 2005 *Vanity Fair*. Angelina Jolie was on the cover of that issue, which may have been how Brad Pitt noticed it; in any case, the book was optioned by Pitt's production company, Plan B.

The filmmakers then put together a script (written by director Rupert Goold and screenwriter David Kajganich), chose the cast, and raised money for production. While the decade-long gap between book

and movie has been frustrating to Finkel, in the intervening years he has managed to get his career back on track. He wrote for *Runner's World*, and for *Esquire* about Longo's wish that Death Row inmates be able to donate their organs. He and photographer John Stanmeyer won a National Magazine Award for a feature on malaria in *National Geographic*.

Last year, he wrote a story for the September 2014 issue of *GQ* that went viral on the Internet: the tale of the "North Pond Hermit," a Maine man who hid in the woods for 27 years until his recent capture, filching food from local homes in order to live. As he had with Longo, Finkel was able to get an interview with the jailed hermit where other journalists failed.

Now, Finkel is experiencing something new—having the world learn about his life via the movies.

Finkel didn't attend the *True Story* premiere at Sundance—he and his wife and their three children are now living in France—but Fox arranged a screening of the film for him in Paris. He had already seen a few drafts of the script and responded with notes, but wasn't involved beyond that.

He says he appreciated Jonah Hill's performance, calling him "a great actor." James Franco's portrayal of Longo also impressed him, as did Felicity Jones, who played Finkel's wife, Jill Barker Finkel. Jill and Jones still trade texts, Finkel says.

Overall, he thinks it's a very good film. "It's not going to appeal to everybody," he says. "It's not a Judd Apatow rom-com. It's about a psychopath and a guy struggling with a terrible time in his life. The material is challenging."

If the film paints Finkel as an opportunist, using the situation with Longo to help revive his career, he doesn't have a problem with that.

"I don't think I look good in the book [either]," he says. "It was a cosmically crazy coincidence. If it was fiction, no one would believe it."

"I don't deserve to be portrayed as an angelic do-gooder," he adds. "It's not a flattering portrayal, but accurate."

But he shies away from any implication that he "likes" what has happened to him.

"I don't like anything about this story," he says. "I've got three children and a wife now. There's nothing darker in hell than what [Longo] did. That said, as a longtime journalist, it's a compelling story. It seemed more visual than most of the stories I've told."

Finkel's growing relationship with Jill, a math professor, whom he had more time to date after being fired by the *Times*, gets considerable attention in the film. In both the movie and in actuality, Christian Longo reached out to Jill. Clips from the film show Longo calling Jill from prison, hoping creepily that they can be "friends," and a troubled Jill questioning Finkel's involvement in Longo's case. When Finkel says he thinks Longo trusts him, she answers, "Can you trust him?"

"My wife hates the fact I talk to him" in real life, Finkel says. "She hates the fact that the guy calls collect who killed his wife and three kids, and the guy who answers—me—has a wife and three kids. She knows I'm a journalist. She under-

stands. It's my career. That's why we've been married for 10 years. She understands my strange compulsion. Yeah, she fucking hates the fact that I take the calls."

It was because of Jill that they moved to France: when they were discussing their future together, they made several agreements, including that they would live outside the United States for a time. She also told Finkel she wanted three kids.

The trailer for the film has been out for a while, and Finkel's friends who've seen it or the film have been "almost entirely positive and supportive," he says—aside from a few comments on the movie's Facebook page poking fun at his being portrayed by Jonah Hill, not known for being especially handsome or athletic. ("Is this the first time in Hollywood history that the actor is NOT better looking than the real person he is playing?" one wrote.)

Finkel says he understands why the filmmakers would cast someone like Hill. "The character has to have flaws," he says. "It's not a book. He has to have visual flaws because it's a movie. It's the character 'Finkel.' It's not me."

In fact, the film's "Finkel" is a nebbishy Jewish guy with asthma, which Finkel does not suffer from. (Larry Smith got the same Jewish-stereotype treatment in *Orange Is the New Black*. As Larry Bloom, played by Jason Biggs, Smith was transformed from a hip Internet-publishing guru into a neurotic Jewish schlub. Finkel says that the two of them "have had an odd discussion about the Smith/Biggs vs. Finkel/Hill tag-teams.")

Finkel used to talk to Longo every Sunday, but "luckily" the murderer can't call France collect. Their relationship is complex—Finkel doesn't call Longo, but he accepts every call he gets from him.

"When that fucker calls, I'll pick up the phone," he says. "I'll follow his story till the day I die. I admit it's not healthy, but I will always be curious about him."

So are they friends?

"Is there a Facebook category of 'it's complicated?'" Finkel says. "I hate him. I don't believe in the death penalty in the abstract, but put him to death. It's fine and dandy to put him to death. He killed his children."

Finkel says that Longo knows that's how he feels, that he wants him to die.

He also admits to some guilt over his success with such a project. "Shit," he

says. "I'm Jewish. Of course I'm feeling guilty about everything. He took my identity; I was thrust into this story. But of course I feel guilty."

He says that some good can come of the tale. "It's my hope that people in a controlling, abusive relationship may have the strength to leave the relationship rather than waiting until it's too late, like [Longo's wife] MaryJane," he says.

Finkel is now focused on a new project, which he won't discuss. "I am completely in love with it and obsessed with it and I've shut down all other projects to work on it," he says. "It should be a book."

He and Randall Lane also recently completed a screenplay—it concerns the dark side of social media—and sent it off to an agent. Having known Finkel since their *DP* days, Lane says he isn't completely surprised about the twists in his life.

"He messed up once, he got caught, and he paid a very big price for it," he says. "What happened [with Longo] was a tragedy; it's horrible. Mike's such a storyteller that he took this tragedy and turned it into a haunting, beautiful book. He's very resilient. He was punished for his mistake and came back from it. You can't get more American than that."

Another longtime friend, Bret Parker—Finkel's companion on that 72-day cross-country bike trip right after they graduated from Penn—also sees Finkel's response as being consistent with his personality and gifts as a writer.

"Since I've known Mike, he's been a collector of stories and a meeter of people. The summer between college and law school, when we biked cross-country, we met so many people. My journal included how many miles we biked ... his so well captured all the various people we met coast to coast. I'm still waiting for it to be published."

"He's got a real eye for people and a real appreciation for personalities, so people talk to him. He's also incredibly curious. I don't see Mike stopping what he does, traveling and talking to people and telling their stories. What happened to him, people could have reacted any number of ways. Mike didn't shy away from it; he leaned into it. I don't see him stopping."◆

Caren Lissner C'93 is finishing up a screenplay and novel. Her first book, *Carrie Pilby*, is being made into a movie.