

Fake Lit



You can fool all of the people some of the time;
you can fool some of the people all of the time;
and that should be enough for most purposes.

Probable text list (to start):

James Frey, *A Million Little Pieces*
John F. Kennedy, *Profiles in Courage*
Benjamin Wilkomirski, *Fragments*
Kaavya Viswanathan, *How Opal Mehta Got
Kissed, Got Wild, and Got a Life*
Brooke Gladstone, *The Trouble with Reality*

Selections from Margaret B. Jones, Isaac
Bashevis Singer, Harry Frankfurt, JT Leroy,
Thomas Chatterton, Mischa Defonseca, Walt
Whitman, Joseph Mitchell, the writer known
as B. Traven, and, in addition to JFK, U.S.
Presidents Grant, Obama, and the current
one, of course.

In this course, we shall examine the phenomenon of phony writing, to one degree or another. These books were all celebrated upon their publication, but each concealed a deep fundamental flaw. Whether ghostwritten (any number of presidential texts), plagiarized by youthful con artists (*Opal Mehta*, Chatterton), written to exploit a false persona (Leroy, Jones, Singer, Traven), straight-up cut and pasted from other things (Whitman), or written as nonfiction to disguise artfully drawn fiction (Wilkomirski, Frey), they were all **fake** to some degree. In each case, fakery serves different purposes, whether out of the need for an author to impress an audience (or a college admissions office, as with Viswanathan's book) or to serve as a (false) witness to real-life trauma, as with the genre of the Holocaust memoir. We shall examine the contexts of these works with letters, critical material and authentic source texts, and for Jones and Wilkomirski, the historical background for the memoir genres they consciously imitate. In addition, we will develop a working theory to assess the Moral Harm dealt by Fake Lit.

Not *everything* we will read will be fake; some texts will be used as a counterpoint to develop a baseline for reality and take the measure of how much out-and-out fabrication is "permissible," especially in today's media environment.