

FAKING by Joanne McNeil  
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Some days the internet feels like a never-ending stream punctured with white text boxes and drop down menus. What is your name? What is your birthday? What is your post code? Check this box if you agree to our Terms of Service and enter the CAPTCHA here. You can put anything in those boxes. Make up a new name and fake your age. There is no fine or prison time for signing up for a new web service with a false name or the wrong birthday. The internet is filled with fake characters, and on the internet, these creations might be vessels for deeper truths.

All human beings splinter some contradictory opinions, beliefs, and ideas. You can never cast a linear narrative out of a person's lived experiences without gluing together disjointed periods with question marks. Identity is elastic. We grow and learn while we try new things. Here is why the internet is so valuable: it lets us live out questions and exist comfortably within life's grey areas. Free of the baggage of personal history, the internet can be a place for escape. To play a fake character online seems to, if anything, reinforce a person's authenticity. That New Yorker cartoon, now almost twenty years old, "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog," is the internet's golden rule. Because what if you really don't know what you want or who you are? You have got to keep moving even if it means wandering in the wrong direction sometimes.

Oscar Wilde once said, "Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth." Literary fiction has long served as a junk drawer to express the truth that lies outside reality's mirror image. Some of the finest works of literature appear to be fact-based like Roberto Bolaño's *Nazi Literature in the Americas*, a fake reference text, which walks readers through short biographies of imagined South American fascist authors and critics. It is so close to reality, it fulfills what culture already expects from history. J. G. Ballard's short story *The Index* provides only the final pages of the "unpublished and perhaps suppressed autobiography" of Henry Rhodes Hamilton. Under "D," alone there are references to John F. Kennedy's assassination and the Normandy landings.

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Philip José Farmer's *Tarzan Alive: A Definitive Biography of Lord Greystoke* adds another skip, the premise is that Tarzan was indeed a real person and Edgar Rice Burroughs was merely writing his fictionalized memoirs. Farmer reveals how staged — how fake — so many biographies seem. So much of a biographer's job is to heighten drama and complicate its subject, but we know from our own lives, that a great deal of personal development comes in quiet moments that cannot be documented — staring out the window, going for a walk on your own, fixing dinner. Yet another skip, the version of *Tarzan Alive* that is included in The Piracy Project's library is Phillip Edward Johnson's appropriation of Farmer's novel extending the story to connect with writers who lived in the author's neighborhood of Stoke Newington in London.

Then there is fiction that is roman à clef, a freedom some authors abuse to settle scores with little remorse. There's no mistaking that Siri Hustvedt's *What I Loved* was inspired by the wife and child the author's husband had before meeting her. The book airs all the dirty laundry of her stepson's involvement with the New York City club kid Michael Alig, who bludgeoned his friend Angel Melendez to death, with names changed and details slightly rearranged so the book is filled under "fiction" rather than "autobiography" in bookstores, meanwhile demonstrating the genre binary is rarely useful.

What are the ethics of mining real life for "fiction" anyway? Is it like a credit report where everything after several years is forgiven? Maybe I am wrong to dismiss Hustvedt so quickly. This is her truth. Her husband's ex-wife and her stepson are part of her life story as well. How many surface level details would have to change to make this book seem less vindictive? Would it make a difference if the stepson were a stepdaughter and the setting wasn't New York but Kiev or Kuala Lumpur?

Like characters always say in reality TV — the fakest television of all — "I didn't come here to make friends." Literature isn't here to make friends. The truth isn't always nice. Literature should tell the truth somehow, and pass through whatever vectors of protection the heart needs to get it out. What is fake fiction? Something written without conviction — and how could anyone be the judge of this besides the author himself?

It is a privilege to tell the truth this way. Writing a novel takes time. Who has that much time? Just the physical effort of typing 80,000 or more words might take more than a day to hammer out. The skill to write beautiful sentences, refine the structure of a piece, develop characters, and dream up plot twists could take a lifetime to develop. Filmmaking requires time and money and labor. You need actors, set designers, sound mixers, editors, and expensive equipment. What happens when the desire to tell a story is stifled by circumstances like time and money? Character creation online is the product of a storytelling drive that might otherwise go into the creation of scripts or novels. It is truth telling through a funhouse mirror.

Problems arise whenever a relationship is a project rather than a connection with another human being. Lying about facts is deception in real life, a hostile act of disrespect toward another person. Lying on the internet might be a creative practice, but this is where things get slippery. In the age of pervasive computing, there's no internet to get "on" anymore, it's everywhere.

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Chayson Basinio was two years old. The boy's great-aunt reported to authorities in Allier, Auvergne that the toddler hadn't been seen in a week, and was likely kidnapped. French police surveyed the area. Divers searched a nearby lake. Someone created a Facebook page with a photo of the child with his 20-year-old father, Rayane Basinio. The child wasn't found and the police attempted to find his parents, who were also missing. Speaking to the Guardian, the public prosecutor, said, "Sadly, this is a very modern-day story. Someone decided to create false Facebook accounts and took pictures from real accounts to feed the false accounts and make these people seem real." The woman who posed as the imaginary child's great-aunt is now in custody. Profiles for the Basinio family were created several months earlier. The whole scenario seems like a familiar trope — the author of a story loses his mind and believes his characters are real — but in this case, the characters have identities on the screen no different than a real person's online presence.

Recently a friend of mine sent along a Facebook profile of someone she believes might be an undercover cop. It was a simple glossy image of a young blond woman who listed Rihanna as a favorite singer and says she works at the fast fashion retailer Forever 21. She has few friends and only a handful of public updates. "Silvia" has some interesting "likes" — Occupy affiliates, labor activists, and other communities in left politics. Plenty of Occupy activists were attractive young women interested in pop culture. If this is the work of an undercover officer, his lack of creativity reinforces stereotypes of who is or isn't politically active. I keep meaning to drop that possibly fake woman on Facebook a line. I would ask her about music and activism. If there is a reason I haven't yet it is because I don't think she would have much to say. As a story, she is one that is badly written. Perhaps some unwise activists get "catfished" this way — who knows? It isn't a likable character but an assemblage of the worst stereotypes about women.

The most famous case of an online unmasking is "A Gay Girl in Damascus," a blog that was later revealed to be the work of a white American man. Amina Arraf appeared to be a quite beautiful young woman. The author of this character Tom MacMaster said he created her in order to participate in online discussions about the Middle East. That seems fair enough, and at the same time ironic that a white man used the internet under the false identity of a woman of color to be taken seriously — a more typical online experience is just the reverse of that.

Blogging as "Amina," MacMaster created profiles for her on a number of social media websites including an online community called "Lez Get Real." Her blog became widely read and MacMaster pushed the experiment to the limits concocting the character's abduction. Creating a

new character, "Rania Ismail," Amina's cousin, MacMaster wrote she was kidnapped by three armed men on her way to a protest meeting. What followed was a flurry of media attention. Things started to unravel when Jelena Lecic, the woman in the photos that were said to be of Amina, a Croatian medical assistant living in London, saw her picture in the Guardian.

Critics took issue with what later appeared between the lines as orientalism and misogyny. "The faked lesbian sex scenes turn my stomach. The narcissistic writing, the sprinkling of quotations from the Koran and tidbits from Syrian history, the stock stories compiled from a thousand news clippings — it all seems painfully obvious," said Minal Hajratwala, quoted in the New York Times. MacMaster once contacted her as Amina, sending along a manuscript of what was later found to be a fake autobiography. It is unfortunate how far this story escalated. As a consequence, the media is less trusting of anonymous activists and writers in conflict areas.

In the fallout, people discovered the person running "Lez Get Real" also presents as male in the real world. He and MacMaster had a flirtatious exchange both unaware the other was also in character. What if we should later learn that MacMaster, or the person who ran "Lez Get Real" experiences gender dysphoria and wishes to transition? People might take back a few unkind words said. But we should be open to this kind of experimentation anyway. Gender is needlessly policed in the physical world, society demands its legibility and forces us to define ourselves into categories that do not always correspond with how one thinks or feels. Yes, MacMaster did a number of cruel things as "Amina," but playing a woman online was not one of them. I think every man and every woman might benefit from playing across gender on the internet once in a while. It is an exercise in empathy.

The internet is a space to play out these question marks. It is a tool for curiosity and mystery, the culmination of human desire and imagination, a measurement of the mind's frontiers. Without face to face meeting, every online interaction exist somewhere on the spectrum of the imaginary. Fake characters like Amina and Chayson Basinio are exaggerations of what already often feels like gigantic interactive fiction experiment. : )

It might be we are coming to the end of a golden age of online faking. It is harder to invent a character online from thin air when even babies have Facebook pages now. In the meantime, you are free to use the internet to stretch your identity to the limits. Go on, make up a fake name. Maybe that form will pass through a series of databases and arrive as junk mail. A magazine or coupon book for a person who never existed, except as words on the network.