

Manuscript Assessment: *True Stories from the Files of the FBI*
Author: W. Cleon Skousen

Summary:

Positives, strengths, what we like about this manuscript:

- With dozens of TV programs about the FBI popular in the U.S. over the last several decades, along with the many popular detective book series and movies in circulation, an updated *True Stories* will surely have a ready audience. Add the fact that *True Stories* offers ... well ... *true stories* is more than icing on the cake. The author's enthusiasm for his subject is contagious and, for the most part, makes for compelling reading. Having an introductory chapter was quite helpful for those of us who are entirely ignorant of the Bureau and its machinations.
- The arrangement of the book was great. I liked the way the author started with a little action, then quickly moved on to an interesting, fact-filled history of the FBI, and then finally provided specific stories of interest. I was also unaware of how involved the FBI was with anti-Nazi activity, and that was very interesting; we usually don't associate the FBI with international threats, so this was enlightening.
- I liked that the style of narration made the book appropriate for both adult and young adult audiences.
- I suspect some of these stories were better known at the time of writing, but these criminals are less known now, and the combination of very well-known names like Baby Face Nelson with names somewhat lost to time, like Kinnie Wagner, make this a really interesting read.

Brief summary of the primary issues that need editing:

- It isn't clear from the title or early material that the book primarily covers true stories from the "gangster" era. The title should be changed to be more clear, or the history, technology, and range of stories should be updated. The existing stories could also benefit from the addition of more recent cases.
- The author is definitely a cheerleader for the FBI, but the result is that the book and its stories offer a one-sided view of the agency.

- While an introduction to this material is certainly worthwhile, the Introduction is too long, and somewhat convoluted, making it confusing and rather tedious.
- Much of what the author has written reads like fiction – entertaining, and appropriate in a book about “stories.” However, their truth is thrown into doubt by the extensive amount of dialogue and introspection from the characters, which could not have been known by the author.
- In some places, the stories are more about the criminals and all they did to evade the FBI rather than the work the FBI did to catch them. This causes the material to sometimes drag as the author includes detail after detail.
- There are several cases of outdated or questionable facts.
- Some sentences read awkwardly, possibly because of the passage of time, or possibly because it could have been better edited the first time around. This would need a skilled editor with a well-developed feel for nuance, because the narration is also very “noir” and this tone should be preserved.

Questions we have for the author, ideas to keep in mind for marketing, reaching the target audience, etc:

- Those updating this book should make a decision about whether to “de-gender” the language or not. Given the fifties feel, and given the fact that I grew up in a world where we defaulted to “he” and “man” over “their” and “human,” this doesn’t stand out to me, but from the point of view of a major publisher, I need to flag it. I personally would leave it as is, but it might garner a larger audience (or better reviews) if “men” were changed more often to “men and women” and similar.
- Would the author be willing to provide a new title and/or description of his book that clarifies that, while the basic stories are true, he is providing a personalized version?
- Could the author personalize his stories to the extent that he includes himself in them; at least as an interpreter if not an actor?
- Would he be willing to provide more recent and varied stories?
- Would he be willing to include some of the more negative stories, which ultimately would give a more well-rounded view of the FBI?

Example 1:

Issue: Title and subject matter alignment

Explanation and potential solution: The book needs a title that makes clear it is primarily focused on one period in the FBI's history (and needs to be edited accordingly), or the book should be expanded to include stories from the agency's later years. Potential title: "True Stories from the FBI's Gangster Files." Otherwise, newer stories such as that of Pan Am Flight 103 and/or those illuminating the capture of numerous serial killers (and more) should be included.

Editing recommendation: Could be fixed with the help of a developmental editor.

Example 2:

Issue: As it is, *True Stories* provides a disproportionately positive, Pollyanna view of the FBI.

Solutions: If a more well-rounded view of the agency is desired, some of the agency's darker stories should be included. Herbert Hoover and the FBI have a decidedly tarnished history when it comes to their dealings with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the Black Power movement, and the War on Drugs. Stories from these episodes would also be of interest. In addition, the Foreword, which is quite long, shines only a positive light on the FBI. The fact that it is clearly written by a relative throws shade on its veracity.

Again, a title change and alternate description could be helpful. "Stories from the Best of the FBI," perhaps, or "One Man's Favorite Stories from the FBI's Gangster Files."

Editing recommendation: Could be fixed through author revision, with support from a development editor.

Example 3:

Issue: Introduction should be more concise, with a focus on context.

Examples and solutions: The Introduction to *True Stories* is longer than any of the stories themselves; in other words, too long. Presumably, it should be a summary of the FBI's history and workings, leaving the stories to the primary content. Several of its sub-chapters could be dropped altogether ("Effect of Pearl Harbor on South America"). The material should be sorted out so that descriptions of the FBI itself are in the Introduction, while stories are with the stories. For example, "The Kurt Ludwig Case"

gives us no insight into the workings of the FBI, but it is an interesting story that is worth including later in the book.

Editing recommendation: Could be fixed with the help of a developmental editor.

Example 4:

Issue: One of *True Stories'* engaging qualities is that the stories read like stories rather than history. The explanation for this is that they are written by someone with a love of writing as well as a love of the FBI. However, the stories are rife with dialogue and introspection that can't possibly be based in fact.

Example: "Floyd was not one to sit still. Day and night in his waking hours he paced back and forth, back and forth, like a caged animal. 'That guy's driving me loopy,' remarked the occupant of a lower apartment."

Solution: Again, such material would become quite acceptable if it is plainly understood that the book is a personalized account. A new title and perhaps an explanation in the Foreword would be appropriate.

Editing recommendation: Instances of this could be identified by a developmental editor, and fixed by the author.

Example 5:

Issue: Several of the stories in *True Stories* are more about car chases and shoot-outs than about the FBI's detective work.

Example and explanation: In the 25-page story "The FBI Investigates Hill-Billy Killer Kinnie Wagner," the FBI isn't even mentioned until 17 pages in. The material would be greatly improved and truer to its purpose if it were sprinkled with references to what the FBI was actually doing most of that time. The chapter on the "Lindbergh Kidnapping" provides a good example of the type of detail about the FBI that is called for in each story.

Editing recommendation: Could be fixed with the help of a developmental editor.

Example 6:

Issue: It is damaging to the credibility of the book to include outdated facts or erroneous material.

Example: Despite the fact that the book was first published in 2015, the Introduction states that “the FBI has Special Agents assigned to 56 field divisions throughout the United States and in Puerto Rico, Alaska and Hawaii.” Alaska and Hawaii became states in 1959; some 62 years ago. It is inaccurate in 2021 to refer to them otherwise. Secondly, the FBI website itself states that the origin story of the term “G-Men” that the author cites is questionable. These two examples are evidence that a good fact checker should go through the book.

Editing recommendation: A developmental editor could help, and a fact-checker could help with accuracy. An update from a ghostwriter could help as well.

Example 7:

Issue: On a related note, the book needs an update, even where it is factually correct.

Example and explanation: In this case, it is not so much one sentence that can be called out (though there are many), but the real problem is that in the areas of technology especially, the book is touting fifties technology. I would not eliminate the excellent explanation of fingerprints, but I would add the new technologies. In the section “Science vs. Crime,” attention is paid to forensic evidence like hair and fibers, but surely some DNA technology should be mentioned too.

The history is much longer now! That section could also use some expansion.

There are now many new stories, some of which are quite famous. New stories could be found at these sites:

- <https://vault.fbi.gov>
- <https://www.archives.gov/iwg/declassified-records/rg-65-fbi>

Editing recommendation: The update could be implemented through development editing and ghostwriting.

Example 8:

Issue: Awkward sentences

Examples and explanations:

- “Although the FBI did not become well known until after the great crime wave of the ‘30s, the organization was in existence many years before.

This is not a “wrong” sentence, just an awkward and imprecise one. “Came into existence” would be more precise, for instance.

- “The new Director knew”

We’d be more likely to give him his name and not just his title nowadays.

- “Like a highly-g geared war plant, the FBI has its assembly lines, its central service pools, and its machinery to bolster the senses of sight and sound so that experts may harness the physical sciences in their war against spies, saboteurs and criminals.”

A long sentence and it took two reads to see what was being said. (Also, “can,” not “may.” This is a common error that a good editor will fix: retaining the difference between can, might, could, may, etc. A lot of recent writing has collapsed all these words into “may”.)

Editing recommendation: Could be fixed through copyediting.

Example 9:

Issue: Language correction

Examples and explanation:

- “It is only 1,685 miles ... no further than a railroad trip from Boston ... to Omaha ...”

Physical distances are “farther” (abstract ideas go “further”)

- See above use of “may” for “can”

Editing recommendation: Copy editing and proofreading.

Example 10:

Issue: Typos and simple errors

Example: “Hillbilly” is not spelled “Hill-Billy” as the story of Kinnie Wagner purports.

Editing recommendation: As with all books, a simple proofread will solve these issues.

Takeaways:

- *True Stories from the Files of the FBI* has genuine potential for readers who want to get a “feel” for the work of the FBI. W. Cleon Skousen’s story writing is enthusiastic and engaging, even fun. However, as is, the book brings to mind an author reminiscing about the “good ol’ days” more than providing a compelling account of the FBI’s work.
- It seems to float between fact and fiction, thus losing its potential dynamic. The material needs to be tightened up, better ordered, fact-checked, and given a title and explanation that give a more accurate idea of what the reader will find.
- *True Stories* requires several rounds of editing to be as engrossing as it could be.
 - The author should work with a developmental editor to bring consistency and integrity to his work.
 - A copyeditor should be employed to help arrange the material more logically and to make it pithier.
 - A fact-checker is called for to ensure that the material is, in fact, 100% truthful.
 - Finally, although there were not loads of errors in spelling, punctuation, etc., a proofreader will be needed to catch the ones that are there.
- Such changes have the potential to give the reader what feels closer to a first-hand account of the experiences the author wants for them. Personally, I feel a new title is key to drawing a new audience, and even attracting previous readers for a fresh look. A new Foreword with an explanation of the newly developed material would also help revive interest in the book.
- People love True Crime stories, and this is the real thing; without the glitz and glamour that TV assigns to crime stories. Facts and drama work together to give the reader a positive, rewarding experience that has both excitement and information to give. Reworked and edited, I think this book still has a lot of potential for sales, and will appeal to people across many demographics.