



# HOW CLIFFORD IRVING STOLE THAT BOOK:

## AN INTERVIEW BY ABBIE HOFFMAN

**T**HIS WAS THE FIRST TIME I had met Clifford Irving. I had sent him a copy of *Steal This Book* with a special dedication along with a letter expressing sympathy with his predicament this past winter. He answered and I called him on the phone the night before Edith went to jail. The interview did not take place under ideal conditions. It was sandwiched in between a television talk show taping and catching the train to visit Edith in prison. In two weeks he himself would be taken to begin serving his two-and-a-half-year sentence. Although most people thought otherwise, his financial difficulties would not be overcome by the profits from his book about

*the book*. There was also the matter of Edith's having to fight extradition to Switzerland.

Aside from all his personal troubles, the setting was incredibly oppressive. On the fortieth floor of a modern Manhattan high-riser we sat under the watchful gaze of his attorney. The law firm was quite prestigious and it was obvious from the start that his attorney didn't approve of us being in the same room together, let alone me conducting an hour interview. For us both, a sense of unreality accompanied the interchange. There were expectations that couldn't be realized. So we tripped along through the hour, becoming, in our separate ways, a little "unstuck in time."



*Abbie: What do you think of the fact that McGraw-Hill is located over a branch of the Irving Trust Company of New York? Irving: Too much!*

*Q. How do you react to rumors that J. Paul Getty wrote your book?*

*A. Ha! With laughter. With gales of laughter.*

*Q. Can we start with a general synopsis for people who don't know the story? How did you get the idea?*

*A. Well, the idea got me, I didn't get it. I read an article in Newsweek about Hughes' exodus from Las Vegas to the Bahamas, and it covered his exploits and the fact that he was inaccessible to the media and had hardly any contact with his chief business aides. I knew nothing about Howard Hughes before this. He was just a name to me, connected with piles of money.*

*Q. Had you read The Carpetbaggers?*

*A. Years ago, but I didn't know it had anything to do with Hughes. I only found that out long after I started writing the fake autobiography.*

*Q. You didn't?*

*A. No, I hadn't a clue, really. The idea, as I say, sprang full blown into my head—to write this gorgeous hoax, to take what Truman Capote did with *In Cold Blood* and turn it around. Capote wrote a fictional book based on fact; I would write a factual book based on fiction. The work would be untrue except that it would be *psychologically* true. At the beginning my idea was to tell McGraw-Hill the plan. I was quickly disabused of that fantasy by Dick Suskind, who worked with me on the book. He said, "You're out of your mind. You can't tell a big corporation. They won't go for that kind of hanky-panky." So I said, suppose I don't tell them. An idea, a happening, was born right then and there.*

*Q. Can you give just briefly an idea of how the book was put together?*

*A. You mean the sources?*

*Q. Yeah, the technique for gathering information.*

*A. We just set out around the United States, to Houston, Las Vegas, Florida, Nassau, New York, California, and dug into every possible newspaper file that we could find and pulled out an amazing amount of stuff. That was our basic form of research. Then we had three extraordinary bonanzas. The first was that Time-Life opened their confidential files to me, put me in a locked room and said,*

*"Go through them." I asked if I could Xerox some papers but they said, "No, the Xerox facilities are too public." And I said, "How about a camera?" and they said, "OK." So I brought a camera up—maybe they thought I was only going to photograph a few documents—but I photographed virtually the entire file. Then we had all sorts of not-for-attribution interviews, and unpublished stuff and reporters' notes dating back to the '30s. For example, when Hughes took the round-the-world flight he was met by a *Time* reporter who covered ten pages with notes. I used all that and it really formed the basis for the hard information in the book. The beautiful part of it was that, because everything was such a secret, only three people at *Life* knew of the project—which was called Project Octavio—and when it came time for *Life's* researchers and staffers to check the veracity of the autobiography, they were checking against the same files which they hadn't realized I had seen, so it all checked out. And the second bonanza was the discovery of the unpublished memoirs of Noah Dietrich. Dietrich was Hughes' right-hand man. I got them in California from a man named Stanley Meyer.*

*Q. A literary agent?*

*A. No, he's not an agent. He was the producer of *Dragnet* and kind of a go-between. He wanted me to write the autobiography of Noah Dietrich. I wasn't interested but he insisted I take a look at the manuscript that already existed. Meyer didn't know I had any interest in Hughes whatsoever. It was just a fantastic coincidence.*

*Q. (laughter) You gave it a bad review as I recall?*

*A. Then we went to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and on the day we arrived, or the day after, the private papers of Lincoln Quarberg were given to the Academy. Quarberg was Hughes' PR man back in the '30s, when Hughes was in the movie business. This file had never been looked at before. It contained all sorts of letters, memos, and inside information about the early Hollywood days and we were the first ones to see it.*

*Q. Ralph Graves, when he gave you access to the Time-Life files, he told you not to tell?*

*A. Right.*

*Q. Managing Editor of *Life* magazine, wasn't he? He*



*Irving: I've gotten a lot of crank mail . . . I got one letter typed beautifully on an IBM Selectric typewriter from a woman who explained she was locked in an ESP time barrel with Howard Hughes.*

said no one was to know that you had seen the files. Has he gotten in trouble or has anybody at Time-Life or McGraw-Hill as a result? Have some heads rolled?

A. Nope, no heads whatsoever. The *Life* people of course have kept very quiet about the fact that they opened their files to me and that I photographed papers and that much of the factual material in the book came from that source. As far as McGraw-Hill was concerned, the decisions were made at the top by the president of McGraw-Hill, Inc., and the president of McGraw-Hill Book Company, so the buck could never be passed to some poor guy in the lower echelons. Later, when Robert Stewart, my editor, was accused of borrowing money from a McGraw-Hill author, it turned out to be precisely ten percent of the advance and that was a scandal that hit the front page of the *New York Times*. He was demoted, and I'm pretty sure that if he hadn't been the editor of the Hughes autobiography he could well have been fired, but they didn't want to make it look like they were searching for a fall guy.

Q. Did you take any particular delight in Frank McCulloch [*Life* magazine's Hughes expert] giving it the seal of approval when its final authenticity was being questioned? That seemed like the final hurdle.

A. It certainly was the final hurdle at that point. I don't know if delight's the right word. I was in such a daze during that period that I almost expected the breaks to go for me, and when McCulloch became convinced that it was real, I was delighted that we had accomplished the kind of book that could pass muster with a man like McCulloch. I was delighted for the book's sake; I wasn't delighted that I had conned McCulloch. I mean I didn't care one way or the other. My purpose was not to make fools out of any individuals or even corporations, just to write that book and make a great book out of it and see that it got published.

Q. Grove let me read the galleys yesterday under carefully guarded conditions. Did you and Richard Suskind ever imagine yourselves as taking on the whole publishing industry? What were your feelings toward the publishing industry? Did that come up at any point?

A. It came up but we were not out to take on the publishing industry. Not that it wasn't a rebellion. I have no great

respect for the publishing industry. The way this book was handled illustrates the whole philosophy of the publishing industry. Go for the big blockbuster, the book that's going to sell hundreds of thousands of copies and make millions of dollars, and never mind about writers. There are very few publishing houses in New York who really publish writers. They're publishing potential best sellers. I remember when I brought my last novel in to McGraw-Hill half-finished. I had a contract with them which said I was to receive a certain payment when it was half done. I was really pleased with the book. It was a novel about expatriate life in Ibiza. I gave it to them and they read it and came back a couple of days later and said to me, "Well, six thousand copies." That was their appraisal of the book. I wanted to hear, was it a good book, a bad book, are you intrigued by the characters, are you in it, do you like it? Where does it touch you and where do you get turned off? I wanted a literary critique and I got sales figures. So naturally, during the writing of the fake autobiography, Dick and I had occasion to discuss the publishing industry in general because we saw how gullible they were and also how greedy. I can't blame them for being greedy when they had this book in their hands. We took no great joy in misusing their trust.

Q. Midway through the project, when you were getting cold feet, you got the idea that to convince them of the authenticity you would double the ante, and you asked for the million dollars instead of the five hundred thousand, and they became convinced that was Hughes' demand. The real Hughes.

A. Yeah, but we only did that under the pressure of this competing autobiography, the one Albert Eaton was peddling. Most of our thinking at the time was that this was a way out. I couldn't believe, with a competing autobiography out on the market trying to be sold to another publisher, that McGraw-Hill would not at some immediate point decide that Irving's book had to be fake as well. I was going to offer to pay them back the hundred thousand, and I offered them a check which they said they'd tear up if I let it out of my hands. They didn't want the money back. You've read the book and you know that the last thing I ever expected was that they would meet the demands or come any-

where near them. I thought they'd say, "OK, a contract is a contract. We can't deal with this madman anymore. We'll take the hundred thousand dollars. Now let's publish the book as an unauthorized biography or a novel." And if they didn't I would have taken it to another publisher as a novel.

*Q. Did you ever get the idea, once the authenticity was questioned, of publishing it as a work of fiction? Would that have been really possible?*

*A. You mean since recent events?*

*Q. Yeah.*

*A. Oh, yeah, I still would like to have the book published. I think it's the best novel I've ever written and it could easily be turned into a novel. It could also be published as is, provided libelous passages were taken out of it and provided that it stated very clearly that it's a bogus autobiography of Howard Hughes. There is a court ruling on it. As we understand it the court has given us permission to publish part or all of the book, provided that it's made perfectly clear that it doesn't purport to be genuine.*

*Q. I thought a funny incident occurred at Germaine Greer's press party when you were introduced to Chief Red Fox. Could you talk about that a little?*

*A. I went to this cocktail party. I was dragged along by Beverly Loo and Robert Stewart. I hate those damn cocktail parties but I had nothing to do and I wanted to meet Germaine Greer 'cause I heard she was six feet tall. But she was far more interested in talking to women's liberation people and I stood around like a dope for awhile until I saw this beautiful old man in a corner. I asked about him and was told that's Chief Red Fox, a 101-year-old Sioux Indian chief, and I said, "Beautiful, I've got to meet him." And I sat at his feet for an hour or two, talked to him, and he was a marvelous old man. But the way he came on to me with the broad American accent and told me how he danced at supermarket openings and was on the Johnny Carson Show where he did a war dance to liven things up, also the way he talked about Indian history, made me a little leery and I thought, well, he's great but he's not a 101-year-old Sioux Indian chief. Despite the fact that he was decked out like a technicolor western with a war bonnet and greasepaint make-up. And I went up to Beverly Loo and said, "He's a great man, Beverly, but he's no more a 101-year-old Sioux Indian than you're the Empress Loo of the Ming Dynasty. She got very uptight about that and said, "What do you mean? How dare you!" and I decided not to upset her any further so I backed off. Then of course it turned out later that there were great doubts thrown on the veracity of his books and his identity as well. I don't know if I really smelled it out but something was funny there. I think maybe I was thinking in terms of a hoax since I was involved with one, and Chief Red Fox seemed to fit right into the category.*

*Q. When incidents like that happened did you start to feel you were watching a movie being made about your life or that you were acting out some kind of movie role?*

*A. Well, going through that year I often felt that it was a happening because we sometimes had control over events but so many things happened that were absurd. And after*

*awhile—not that I saw myself as a movie star—I saw this whole thing developing as a script, a movie script which no one would ever buy because it was ridiculous, it couldn't possibly happen. The real and the unreal in a sense became totally confused—not that I really thought I was writing the autobiography of Howard Hughes, although of course in the act of creation you have to believe to a certain extent, but when you stop work you don't believe any more. I mean you know what you're doing but all the events had such a quality of ludicrousness and fantasy and coincidence that reality did at times blend with unreality. I think for the publishers as well.*

*Q. You said at one point in the book you felt you knew more about Hughes than Hughes himself after awhile. Did you start to get a feeling that you had something like ESP, some mystical ability which enabled you to come up with incidents in his life which he didn't even remember? You mentioned a number of things in your critique of his telephone press conference.*

*A. It wasn't ESP or a mystical ability; again, it's that as a novelist, when you create a character as we were creating Howard Hughes, you eventually feel that you know more about him than he does. There is a moment when the character takes over and that happened in the creation of the Hughes autobiography. Hughes took over and there is a kind of identification and a certain humility on the part of the writer, because you feel you're plugged into a source and all the energy is flowing from your character and really telling you what to write. I also believe that autobiography in general is a false art, in the sense that who can sit down and tell the truth about themselves? It's not only that you are being defensive and that you're posturing and omitting and exaggerating, but who knows the truth about himself? So we were not hampered by any of the hang-ups that the real Howard Hughes might have had if he sat down to write his own autobiography. So it's entirely possible that a lot of the psychological plumbing that we did in the book could really be closer to the truth or an area of the truth about Howard Hughes than any autobiography he might write himself.*

*Q. Cliff, recently I spoke at a conference of reporters on the subject of how the press covers me. I had four thousand clippings for the whole year and I distilled a typical newspaper article out of this collage, which began "Six-foot, two-inch blonde-haired Miss Abbie Hoffman, 42, staggers out of his fashionable Eastside penthouse." It went on and on. I based the article only on other articles that were entirely made up. You know, meetings that never took place in cities where I've never been. You must know what I mean now that you have been in the news. Now since so many lies have been written about Hughes and since he keeps so isolated, isn't he incredibly more invented than you or I?*

*A. Yes, he has to be invented in the same way that the media invented us. I've read stories about me and I thought, what have these people been smoking, where did they get all this? It's gossip masquerading as fact. I think that what few people can really get into their heads is that when they are reading a newspaper story—I don't care if it's the New York Times or some backwater paper—what they're reading is one man's opinion. One man's distillation of what he*



*Abbie: Do you have a credit card? Irving: It's been cancelled. I loved my credit card—it's a great invention.*

thinks are the facts and those facts have always come from personal sources. I've reached a point where the only things I believe now are the ball scores, and if some historian fifty or a hundred years from now sat down to write what happened in the Hughes caper and used the newspapers and the television media for his source material, it would be absurd. There would be no truth to it at all, just fragments of truth which would be obscured by all the gossip. It's giving me the feeling that it's virtually not worth reading the newspapers anymore. Unless you want to know what people are thinking. By reading the newspapers you simply find out what the current myths are. Forget about truth. Dick Suskind, who worked with me on the book and who has written a number of history books for children, says he could never write another history book again. How could he believe his sources?

*Q. Maybe it's peculiar to the United States or because of television, but people feel they know public people on a very personal level. You've probably gotten all kinds of strange letters. What's your mail like?*

*A. I've gotten a lot of crank mail advising me to turn to Jesus for help, a lot of abusive letters, and many letters of praise, and what a shame you didn't get away with it, and letters of advice, and many of them are on just that personal level you're talking about. I got one letter typed beautifully on an IBM Selectric typewriter from a woman who explained she was locked in an ESP time barrel with Howard Hughes. I didn't read many of those letters as I had troubles of my own.*

*Q. You didn't really move to isolate yourself I remember. Everyone knew you were staying at the Chelsea Hotel and could see you walking on the streets.*

*A. It was strictly a practical decision to stay in New York City. I had to be near my lawyer's office for conferences day in and day out, and if I had hidden myself out in the suburbs I would have had to commute to his office. And the Chelsea, of course, is a great place to stay. We had friends there and Edith needed people to talk to. She was going through a very rough time. We'd get babysitters easily and there were other kids in the hotel. To get back to the mail, what really blew my mind was I got close to a hundred tear*

sheets of that *Time* magazine cover labelling me "con man of the year." The people asked me to autograph the cover and return it. Talk about *chutzpah*! After I got the first three, as soon as I opened the envelope and saw the edge of that *Time* cover, I pitched it into the wastebasket. The whole folk hero bit is something I don't understand. You've been through it. I don't know what reality it has for you but it has none for me whatsoever.

*Q. Well, when your story broke we were living at the farthest point my bail restrictions would allow. I started living under another name, grew a beard and a nice garden, and stopped reading newspapers for five months. Actually it was hearing about you that got me re-interested in civilization, in "what's happening." Bert Schneider, you know him, he has this view that there should be a Clifford Irving Fund for you where everyone in the public should send in one dollar, because the media in a sense has ripped you off and everyone had all this entertainment.*

*A. I've spoken to a lot of people who said to me it was a pleasure to read the story; they were sick of reading about rapists and muggings and murders and My Lais and new eruptions in the Middle East, and here was this caper where no one was hurt and it had glamorous figures involved and it was great fun. Of course it wasn't fun for us. We were right in the thick of it fighting for our lives. When I saw a gang of newspapermen, my only thought was how the hell do I get past them without accidentally smashing some guy's camera or tripping over the table or saying something I shouldn't. And that was the only reality. My kids loved it. For them it was great to see all the cameras and the people. They are very outgoing kids and suddenly they were being asked questions by all sorts of strangers. When you have a label and are a public figure—which I suddenly found myself—in a sense you're removed from the area of truth and you have to start thinking, well, whatever I say they may take seriously, they may distort, but whatever happens I can't be myself because they've already got a preconception. They will fit the real me into the cubbyhole they've worked out. And when you're in the kind of position that I was in, where every statement you make can bring punishment or*

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**F**OR SOME REASON, EVERYONE was shocked. There they were, these little Chinese kids running around shooting each other down in front of tourists and curio shops, pumping lead into the brothers on the block, making it with rapidfire executions in public telephone booths. Ten dead bodies. Just like that.

Freak-out at City Hall. San Franciscans don't dig that culture number. Mayor Alioto and his financial district/hotel district/shopping district cronies are worried about the great tourist dollar—a San Francisco landmark. With a sweep of his hand, the mayor declares that Chinatown streets are safe for white tourists. After all, these little ghetto kids are just killing each other.

Alioto turns to his police chief. The police chief, pondering his inscrutable tea leaves, considers re-organizing the department's superwhite Chinatown police squad. The chief says he knows all about the killings but can't prove anything. Actually, his detectives don't know which plastic pagoda to look under next, but they offer their Fu Manchu bonbons to an image-hungry press: it's either gang warfare, extortion, drugs, prostitution, gambling or vice and vice versa. That ought to about cover it, fellas. Maybe we're back to tong warfare.

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by Min S. Yee

Down in the ghetto, the Chinatown merchants are worried too. Besides scaring the tourists from their shops and restaurants, these little rascals are putting away free meals and pocketing cash register change. By any other lingo, that's extortion. They, too, want the Chinatown streets safe. Safe so they can continue crawling on the backs of their brothers and sisters sweating in the kitchens for 95 cents an hour, going blind over a sewing machine for less. Unlike ghetto blacks, we Chinese are at the mercy of both the white power structure and the merchant power clique within our own ghetto—the Uncle Tongs, as the Chinese Establishment is nicknamed.

It has taken a little more than a century for us to get even the beginnings of decent work in this country. And in that period we managed to survive beatings and lynchings, legal and electoral expropriations, ostracism and racism, and the blood-sucking leeches of the Uncle Tongs and the Chiang Kai-shek gangs. Barely.

But why all the fuss? Aren't we inscrutable, the docile-educated, hard-working, self-effacing, frugal ingredient of the Great American Dream, the delicate but exotic yellow sauce in the vast melting pot? And haven't we staggered forth from the railroad camps, the steaming kitchens, the laundry cubicles—where America put us to do our Horatio Alger thing—into the halls of engineering and the academes of science? After all, didn't we come here willingly, to do the sort of work no other white person cared to do?

It was not quite that auspicious a beginning. According to my grandfather, we Chinese were kidnapped and falsely