

JUST THE FACTS, MA'AM

Why we fact-check *Gravy*

BY SARA CAMP MILAM

FIFTEEN-AND-A-HALF YEARS AGO, I WALKED into the Old Main building at the University of Central Arkansas to begin an unpaid editorial internship at *The Oxford American*, as the magazine's name was styled in those days. One of my first lessons that week was a crash course in fact-checking. My teacher was a fellow intern with senior status: a UCA undergraduate who'd been at *The OA* a year or so by then. (This was what we called it for short, years before Netflix released an unrelated science fiction series by the same name.) I think he had been instructed to scare me into taking the responsibility seriously, and he succeeded.

There was good reason for this tactic: Three years earlier, *The OA* had printed an essay entitled "Coal Miner Mother" by a reclusive yet sought-after writer called JT LeRoy. In this essay, he recounted shoplifting food and liquor from a Nashville-area Publix with his mother, the latest in a series of published pieces recounting his painful childhood. But, as a Houston journalist soon realized, Tennessee doesn't allow liquor sales at grocery stores, and there were no Publix stores in the state at the time his story (supposedly) took place.

Eventually, Leroy was unmasked as a hoax

with a backstory almost as bizarre as the fictions he—actually, she—passed off as memoirs, but not before duping a number of book and magazine editors and Hollywood film producers who, in retrospect, should have known better. Many of Leroy's lies could have made it into the pages of many reputable magazines by passing through a crack called "on author": The fact-checker accepts as true a detail that only the author himself can verify. But it turned out *The OA* had missed a few very checkable details in Leroy's essay, an oversight that would inform the training of every subsequent fact-checker.

Three years later, I was taught to check for exactly those kinds of inaccuracies. I remember "JT LeRoy" being invoked in the office as shorthand for why we fact-checked as assiduously as we did. But I didn't actually remember that sentence, those details—Tennessee, Publix, liquor—when I began planning this editor's note. It's another argument in favor of fact-checking: We're human. We forget stuff.

I wish I'd kept a list of the more arcane, off-the-wall, and borderline ridiculous facts I chased down that year. The annual music issue demanded the most intensive checking: combing the fine



print of liner notes for a horn credit or the correct punctuation of a quoted lyric. By the following summer, I was the one training a new crop of interns, measuring my tone to inject a healthy dose of fear each lesson.

I enjoyed the work, enjoyed geeking out on tracking down sources, finding answers, and offering corrections to sentences, phrases, and even punctuation marks that very few readers would even think to question. (It's Dr Pepper, weirdly.) But once I moved up the editorial ladder, I can't say I missed the tedious nature of fact-checking all that much. Some of my early romance with it may have been simple proximity—*I'm doing a literary thing! I'm helping to make a magazine!* But what's telling is that the fact-checking system I brought to *Gravy* (and later, to *Gravy* podcast) looks a lot like the one I learned at *The OA*.

I'm lucky to work with a handful of women who approach the job with grace, gravity, and, when the occasion calls for it (as it often does), a healthy dose of humor. Olivia Terenzio, who spends much of her time on the podcast side

of *Gravy* these days, proved herself as a thorough—and thoroughly organized—fact-checker as a graduate student. On the print side, Katie Carter King copyedits and fact-checks each issue, catching and correcting everything from inconsistent spellings to missing commas to misquoted statistics. Last year, Heather Cole, a seasoned archivist and researcher who has been building the SFA's digital archive for the last three years, joined the team as our podcast fact-checker.

I brag on *Gravy's* fact-checkers because their work matters. And because, when done well, that work is unseen. As a quarterly magazine and a biweekly podcast, we don't break news. We've never sent a reporter to a war zone or to the White House. But we care deeply that the stories we tell are true and accurate. It's too easy to find ones that aren't.

I'm sure we've made mistakes, and I'm acutely aware that, as soon as I crow about our fact-checking, some eagle-eyed reader is all the more likely to spot an error in this issue. So be it. We'll keep doing our best to get it right. 🍷